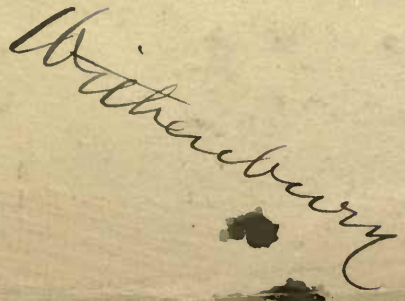
The POOL of FLAME

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



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THE POOL OF FLAME

ILLUSTRATIONS

"'Terence,' she said, 'I think I am very weary. Take me home'" (Page 350) *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"His dominant emotion of the moment, an intense and pitiful solicitude for the dying man, threw him off his guard" (Page 250) . 106

"She was visibly armed and prepared against danger in whatever form she might have to encounter it" 254

"Grinning with anguish, the man . . . staggered and, throwing back his arm, flung the Pool of Flame from him with all his might" (Page 261) 312

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CHAPTER ONE

A STILL and sultry dusk had fallen, closing an oppressive, wearing day: one of those days whose sole function seems to reside in rendering us irritably conscious of our too-close casings of too-solid flesh; whose humid and inert atmosphere, sodden with tepid moisture, clings palpably to the body, causing men to feel as if they crawled, half-suffocated, at the bottom of a sea of rarefied water.

The hour may have been eight; it may have been not quite that, but it was almost dark. The windows were oblongs black as night in the yellow walls of O'Rourke's bedchamber in the Hôtel d'Orient, Monte Carlo.

I have the honour to make known to you the O'Rourke of Castle O'Rourke in the county of Galway, Ireland; otherwise and more widely known as Colonel Terence O'Rourke; a chevalier of the Legion of Honour of France; sometime an officer in the Foreign Legion in Algiers; a wanderer, spendthrift, free-lance, cosmopolite—a gentleman-adventurer, he's been termed.

He was dressing for dinner. The glare of half a

dozen electric bulbs discovered him all but ready for public appearance—not, however, quite ready. In his shirt sleeves he faced a cheval-glass, pluckily (if with the haggard eye of exasperation) endeavouring to outmaneuvre a demon of inanimate perversity which had entered into his dress tie, inciting it to refuse to assume, for all his coaxing and his stratagems, that affect of nonchalant perfection so much sought after, so seldom achieved.

Patently was the thing possessed by a devil; O'Rourke made no manner of doubt of that. Though for minutes at a time he fumbled, fidgeted, fumed, it was without avail. Between whiles—and sometimes for as long as sixty seconds—he had recourse to guile and, ostensibly giving over the unequal contest, would thrust both hands in his trouser-pockets and wander aimlessly round the room, endeavouring to deceive the damned thing by assuming the expression of an insouciant saint thoroughly impregnated with imperturbable patience. A subterfuge so transparent that, of course, it proved deservedly profitless.

His room itself was in a state of considerable disorder—something due mainly to O'Rourke's characteristic efforts to find just what he might happen to desire at any given time without troubling to think where it ought properly to be. From a coat-hanger hooked to the chandelier hung a dressing-gown, giddily beflowered. Upon the bed, in the

centre of an immaculate spread, a pair of boots, spurred and dusty, reposed with an air of fatigued abandon. Their trees stood upon a mantel, with a rakish air of masquerading as vases without much caring whether or not the disguise were successful. From out a shallow, curtained alcove, intended for use as a clothes-closet, coats of all imaginable cuts and materials had flown wildly to every point of the compass in a singularly successful endeavour to escape association with their respective waistcoats and trousers. Surrounded by a miniature avalanche of shirts, an open trunk in the corner conveyed a vivid impression of having recently been in violent eruption. A surprising assortment of collars, together with neckties in rainbow-hued multitudes, had cascaded from the open drawers of a bureau. A battalion of boots and shoes cluttered the floor, wearing a guilty look as of having been arrested in the act of a simultaneous stampede for freedom. . . .

Something of this confusion, mirrored in the glass, was likewise reflected in O'Rourke's eyes, what time he paused for breath and profanity. "Faith, 'tis worse than a daw's nest, the place," he admitted, scandalised. "How ever did I—one lone man—do all that, will ye be telling me?" He flung out two helpless baffled hands, and let them fall. After a meditative pause he added: "Damn that Alsatian!" —with reference to his latest and least competent

valet, who had but recently been discharged with a flea in his ear and a month's unearned wage in his pocket. "For knowing me ways," sighed O'Rourke, "there was never anyone the like of Danny."

For as many as three livelong days this man had been reduced to the necessity of dressing himself with his own fair hands—and that at least thrice daily, who did nothing by halves. And, somehow, mysteriously, his discarded garments had for the most part remained where he had thrown them, despite the earnest efforts of the *femme de chambre* to restore something resembling order from this man-made chaos. For servants all liked well the O'Rourke, improvident soul that he was, freehanded to a fault.

You are invited to picture to yourself O'Rourke as invariably he was in one of his not infrequent but ever transient phases of affluence: that is, a very magnificent figure indeed. Standing a bit over six feet, deep of chest and lean of flank, with his long, straight legs he looked what he had been meant to be, a man of arms and action. His head was shapely, its dark hair curling the least in the world; and, ineradicably stained a transparent brown, his features were lean, eager, and rendered very attractive by quick boyish eyes in whose warm blue-grey depths humour twinkled more often than not—though those same eyes were not seldom thoughtful, a trace wistful, perhaps, with the look of one who recalls dear

memories, old friends and sweethearts loved and lost. . . . For he had begun to live early in life and had much to look back upon, though for all that it's doubtful if he were more than thirty at the time he became involved in the fortunes of the Pool of Flame.

For the rest of him, barring the refractory tie the man was strikingly well-groomed, while his surroundings spoke for comfortable circumstances. On the authority of the absent and regretted Danny, who had long served the O'Rourke in the intimate capacities of body-servant, confidant and chancellor of the exchequer (this last, of course, whenever there happened to be any exchequer to require a chancellor), there was never anyone at all who could spend money or wear clothes like himself, meaning the master. And at this time O'Rourke was ostensibly in funds and consequently (as the saying runs) cutting a wide swath. Heaven and himself only knew the limits of his resources; but his manner a Monte Cristo might have aped to advantage. His play was a wonder of the Casino; for the matter of that, his high-handed and extravagant ways had made the entire Principality of Monaco conscious of his presence in the land. And you fail in the least to understand the nature of the man if you think for a moment that it irked him to be admired, pointed out, courted, pursued. He was, indeed, never so splendid as when aware that he occupied the public eye. In short, he was just an Irishman. . . . So,

then, it's nothing wonderful that he should seem a thought finical about the set of his tie.

Now as he stood scowling at his image, and wishing from the bottom of his heart he had never been fool enough to let Danny leave him, and calling fervent blessings down upon the head of the fiend who first designed modern evening-dress for men—he found himself suddenly with a mind divested of any care whatever and attentive alone to a sound which came to him faintly, borne upon the heavy wings of the sluggish evening air. It was nothing more nor less than a woman singing softly to herself (humming would probably be the more accurate term), and it was merely the tune that caught his fancy; a bit of an old song he himself had once been wont to sing, upon a time when he had been a happier man. It seemed strange to hear it there, stranger still that the woman's voice, indistinct as it was, should have such a familiar ring in his memory. He frowned in wonder and shook his head. "The age of miracles is past," he muttered; "'twould never be herself. I've had me chance—and forfeited it. 'Twill not come to me a second time. . . ."

The singing ceased. Of a sudden O'Rourke swore with needless heat, and, plucking away the offending tie, cast it savagely from him. "The divvle fly away with ye!" he cried. "Is it bent on driving me mad ye are? I'd give me fortune to have Danny back!

. . . Me fortune—faith!" He laughed the word to bitterest scorn. "'Tis meself that never had the least of anything like that without 'twas feminine—with a 'mis-' tacked onto the front of it!" And he strode away to the window to cool off.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

Even as he watched, stark night fell, black as a pocket beneath a portentous pall of cloud. . . . Far out upon the swelling bosom of the Mediterranean a cluster of dim lights betrayed a stealthy coasting steamer, making westwards. Nearer, in the harbour, a fleet of pleasure craft, riding at anchor on the still, dark tide, was revealed in many faint, wraith-like shapes of grey, all studded with yellow stars. Ashore, endless festoons of coloured lamps draped the gloom of the terraces; the façade of the Casino stood out lurid against the darkness; the hotels shone with reflected brilliance, the palace of the Prince de Monaco loomed high upon the peninsula, its elevations picked out with lines of soft

fire. . . . Voices of men with the gay discreet laughter of women drifted up to him, blended with syncopated strains from invisible orchestras. And in the night air, saturated with the heavy perfume of exotic blooms, there was the warning of rain before dawn. . . .

The O'Rourke shook his head, condemning it all. "'Tis beautiful," he said; "faith, yes! 'tis all of that. But I'm thinking 'tis too beautiful to be good for one—like some women I've known in me time. 'Tis not good for Terence—that's sure; 'tis the O'Rourke that's going stale and soft with all this easy living. . . . Me that has more than many another to live for and hope for and strive for! . . . And I'm lingering here in the very lap of luxury, stuffing meself with rare food, befuddling meself with rarer wines—me that has fought a day and a night and half a day atop of that on nothing and a glass of muddy water!—risking me money as if there was no end to it, throwing it away in scandalous tips like any drunken sailor! And all for the scant satisfaction of behaving like a fool of an Irishman. . . . 'Tis sickening—disgusting; naught less. . . . I'm thinking this night ends it, though; come the morning I'll be pulling up stakes and striking out for a healthier, simpler place, where there's something afoot a man can take an interest in without losing his self-respect. . . . I'll do just that, I will!"

This he meant, firmly, and was glad of it, with a heart immeasurably lightened by the strength of his good resolution. He began to hum the old tune that the unknown woman's voice had set buzzing in his brain, and broke off to snap his fingers defiantly at the Casino. "That for ye!" he flouted it—"sitting there with your painted smile and your cold eyes, like the brazen huzzy ye are—Goddess of Chance, indeed!—thinking ye have but to bide your time for all men to come and render up their souls to ye! Here's once that ye lose, madam; after this night I'm done with ye; not a sou of mine will ever again cross your tables. I'll have ye to understand the O'Rourke's a reformed character from the morning on!"

He laughed softly, in high feather with his conceit; and, thinking cheerfully of the days of movement and change that were to follow, the song in his heart shaped itself in words upon his lips.

"I'm Paddy Whack
From Ballyhack,
Not long ago turned soldier—O
At grand attack,
Or storm or sack,
None than I will prove bolder—O!"

His voice was by way of being a tenor of tolerable quality and volume, but untrained—nothing wonderful. It was just the way he trolled out the

rollicking stanza that rendered it infectious, irresistible. For as he paused the voice of the woman that had reminded him of the song capped the verse neatly.

"An' whin we get the route
Wid a shout,
How they pout!
Wid a ready right-about
Goes the bould soldier-boy!"

O'Rourke caught his breath, startled, stunned. "It can't be——!" he whispered. For if at first her voice, subdued in distance, had stirred his memory with a touch as vague and thrilling as the caress of a woman's hand in darkness, now that he heard the full strength of that soprano, bell-clear and spirited, he was sure he knew the singer. He told himself that there could be no two women in the world with voices just like that; not another than her he knew could have rendered the words with so true a spirit, so rare a brogue—tinged as that had been with the faintest, quaintest exotic inflection imaginable.

But she had stopped with the verse half sung. His pulses quickening, O'Rourke leaned forth from the window and carried it on:

"O, 'tis thin the ladies fair
In despair
Tear their hair!
But—'Tis divvle a bit I care!'
Cries the bould soldier-boy!"

There fell a pause. He listened with his heart in his mouth, but heard nothing. And it seemed impossible to surmise whence, from which of all the rooms with windows opening upon that side of the hotel, had come the voice of the woman. She might as well have been above as below him, or on either side: he could not guess. But he was determined.

Now there was beneath his window a balcony with a floor of wood and a rail of iron-filigree—a long balcony, extending from one corner of the hotel to the other. At intervals it was splashed with light from the windows of chambers still occupied by guests belatedly busy, like himself, with the task of dressing for the evening. The window to his left was alight; that on his right, dark. With half his body on the balcony, his legs dangling within the room, O'Rourke watched the opening on his left with jealous, breathless expectancy. Not a sound came therefrom. He hesitated.

"If that weren't her room, I'd hear somebody moving about," he reasoned. "'Tis frightened she is—not suspecting 'tis me. . . . But how do I know 'tis herself? . . . Faith! could me ears deceive me?"

With that he took heart of hope and broke manfully into the chorus, singing directly to the lighted window, singing the first line with ardour and fervour, with confidence and with hope, singing persuasively, pleadingly, anxiously, insistently.

"For the worrld is all befo-ore us——"

he sang, then paused. He heard no echo. And again he essayed, with that in his tone to melt a heart of ice:

"For the worrld is all befo-ore us——"

And now he triumphed and was lifted out of himself with sheer delight; for from the adjoining room came the next line:

"And landladies ado-ore us——"

Unable to contain himself, he chimed in, and in duet they sang it out to the rousing finale:

"They ne'er rayfuse to sco-ore us,
But chalk us up wid joy!
We taste her tap, we tear her cap——
'O, that's the chap
For me,' cries she——
'Whiroo!
Isn't he the darlint, the bould soldier-boy!'"

As the last note rang out and died, the next window was darkened; the woman had switched off the lights. He heard a faint rustle of silken ruffles. "'Tis herself," he declared in an agony of anticipation—"herself and none other! And I'm thinking she'll be coming to the window now——"

He was right. Abruptly he discovered her by

the reflected glow from the illumination behind him. He was conscious of the pallid oval of her face, of a sleek white sheen of arms and shoulders, of a dark mass of hair, but more than all else of the glamour of eyes that shone into his softly, like limpid pools of darkness touched by dim starlight.

Inflamed, he leaned toward her. "Whist, darling!" he stammered. "Whist! 'Tis myself—'tis Terence——"

But she was gone. A low, stifled laugh was all his answer—that and the silken whisper of her skirts as she scurried from the window. He flushed crimson, waited an instant, then flung discretion to the winds, and found himself scrambling out upon the balcony. Heaven only knows to what lengths the man would have gone had not the slam of a door brought him up standing; she had left her room!

So she thought to escape him so easily! He swore between his teeth with excitement and tumbled back whence he had come. Regardless of the fact that he was still in his shirt-sleeves he rushed madly for the door. On the way a shooting-jacket on the floor, perhaps in revenge for neglect and ill-treatment, maliciously wound itself round his feet and all but threw him headlong; only a frantic clutch at the footrail of the bed saved him. Kicking the thing savagely off he flung himself upon the door and threw it open. His jaw dropped.

The lift shaft was directly opposite. Before it, in more or less patient waiting, stood a very young and beautiful woman in a gown whose extreme candour was surpassed only by the perfection of its design and appointment—both blatant of the *Rue de la Paix;* a type as common to the cognoscenti of Monte Carlo as the Swiss hotel porters. But O'Rourke did not know her from Eve.

"The divvle!" said he beneath his breath.

He was mistaken; but the young woman, at first startled by his unceremonious appearance, on instantaneous second thought decided to permit him to discover that twin imps, at least, resided in her eyes. And when his disappointment prevented him from recognising them, her dawning smile was swiftly erased and her ascending eyebrows spoke eloquently enough of her haughty displeasure. Synchronously the lift hesitated at that landing and the gate clanged wide; the young woman wound her skirts about her and showed him a back which at any other time would have evoked his unstinted admiration. Then the gate shot to with a rattle and bang, and the lift dropped out of sight, leaving the man with mouth agape and eyes as wide.

A beaming but elderly *femme de chambre* on duty in the corridor, remarking O'Rourke's pause of stupefied chagrin, hoped and believed he needed her services. She bore down upon him, accordingly.

"M'sieu' is desirous of——?"

He came out of his trance. "Nothing," he told her with acid brevity. "But, yes," he reconsidered with haste. "That lady who but this moment took the lift—her name?"

"Her name, m'sieu'? Ma'm'selle Voltaire."

"Impossible!" he told himself aloud, utterly unable to forge any connecting link between the lady in the lift and her whose voice had bewitched him.

"But assuredly, m'sieu'. Do I not know—I who have waited upon her hand and foot these three days and to whom she has not given as much as—that." The woman ticked a fingernail against her strong white teeth. "Ma'm'selle Victorine Voltaire," she asserted stubbornly.

"Of the Folies, I daresay," he suggested, abstracted.

"Or Maxim's, m'sieu'—or of where? Who knows?" A shrug as expressive as its accompanying *moue* deprecated the social standing of the lady in question so absolutely that, forthwith, she had less than none.

"Oh, well—plague take 'em both!" O'Rourke fumbled in his pocket and found a golden ten-franc piece, surrendering it to the woman as heedlessly as though it had been as many centimes. "I'll be leaving me room in five minutes, now. And do ye, for the love of Heaven, me dear, try to set me things the least trifle to rights. Will ye now, like the best little girl in the world?"

The best little girl in the world, who was forty-five if a day, promised miracles—with a bob of a courtesy. But so disgruntled was O'Rourke that he shut his door in her face.

" 'Tis meself that's the fool," he said, savagely enough, " to think for a moment that ever again I'd set me eyes on her pretty face—God bless it, wherever she may be! . . . For why should I deserve to—I, the penniless adventurer? "

CHAPTER TWO

After that bitter disappointment his interest in his personal appearance dwindled to the negligible. In a black temper with himself (whom alone he blamed for the deception to which he had fallen too facile a victim) he searched blindly for a fresh tie, found it somehow, and knotted it round his collar in the most haphazard fashion imaginable. Then he shrugged a dress coat upon his shoulders and marched forth to dine.

Because he held the cuisine of the Hotel d'Orient in abomination, he elected to make his meal nowhere else, thus proving to himself conclusively that he didn't care what happened to him *now*. Who was he, anyhow—the rough soldier of fortune—to be finding fault with the food that was set before him, or, for the matter of that, the drink either—so long as there was enough of both?

In this humour he propelled himself with determination into the public restaurant of the establishment and, oblivious to the allure of many a pair of bright eyes that brightened all too readily to challenge his, insisted upon a table all to himself and

dined in solitary grandeur, comporting himself openly as a morose and misunderstood person, and to his waiter with a manner so nearly rude that the latter began almost to respect him.

After some time he was disgusted to discover that he felt better. An impulse toward analysis led him to probe the psychology of the change, with the result that he laid the blame for it at the door—or the neck—of a half-bottle of excellent burgundy. So he ordered another and, resolutely dismissing from his mind the woman who had no right whatever to be able to sing a certain song the way she had, set his wits to work on the riddle of To-morrow.

To a man whose trade was fighting, the world just then was a most distressful place, too peaceful entirely. In no quarter of it to which his mind turned in longing and hopeful inquiry, in no land however remote or the contrary, savage or tame, could he detect symptoms of anything resembling a rumpus worthy his attention, his ambition, or his recognised abilities. South America he pondered only briefly, dismissing it with a contemptuous shake of the head. While as for the Balkans—*pouf!*—the Balkans never burgeoned with the black flower of their grim promise; a man who waited for the Balkans to get down to business would grow as rusty and stiff as a condemned magazine-gun. Africa? It was true, according to rumour at least, that the French were enjoying their annual differ-

ence of opinion with the Touaregg, somewhere south of Biskra; but that could be nothing more than an insignificant border war, in which an honest mercenary would profit scantily if at all. Indeed, it was the opinion of the O'Rourke, who knew the Touaregg of old, that the French got small change from them; though the converse was likewise true; the desert people were chiefly useful in that they provided excellent training for the conscripts of France. In Asia only India rumbled; and O'Rourke —perhaps fatuously—held with the English that the foreboded eruption, however inevitable, would be long in coming. . . . Alack! where might a man turn to find honourable fighting, honest loot?

Over his coffee the adventurer nodded in despair and frowned in disgust; then rousing, he summoned the waiter and paid his reckoning with a secret grin at himself, a fifty-franc note and a gesture which splendidly obliterated altogether every trace of suspicion that he intended to take back any part of the change due him.

Trimming and lighting a cigar, he reviewed the restaurant with a listless eye which discovered no one of his acquaintance; therefore, with neither haste nor waste of time, he rose and betook himself to the Casino—that is, to the one place where one may feel certain of encountering, sooner or later, everybody who is anybody within the bounds of the principality.

In the lobby he was passed with effusion by attendants to whom he was but too well known. As has been remarked, O'Rourke never cut a modest figure; and he had now been for ten consecutive nights conspicuous at the tables in the *salles de jeu*, where his luck was popularly deemed phenomenal. For he had played like a prince or a prodigal, with so easy a hand and a demeanour so carefree, that gossip credited him with one of three diverse distinctions: he was either a prince incognito, a defaulting bank president, or the titled husband of an American girl. Indeed it's probable that the ease with which he manipulated his money blinded the envious to the fact that he lost as much, if not as frequently, as he won; so that only to himself, to those astute accountants the croupiers and those aloof financiers who skulk behind the *nom de guerre* of the *Sociétè Anonyme des Bains de Mer et du Cercle des Etrangers á Monaco* was it known that he had been lucky mainly in not losing all that he possessed.

This night, more particularly than on any preceding it, now that he had made up his mind to seek betterment of his fortunes elsewhere, he played heedlessly, little concerned with the fate of what money he had about him. He had set aside a reserve fund sufficient to settle his hotel bill and carry him a considerable distance into the unknown which he was resolved to beard, and was resigned to lose

the remainder. It was a tenet of his creed of fatalism that chance seldom favoured him when he had money in his pockets; the tide of his affairs must be at its lowest ebb ere it turned. His policy then was obvious—childishly plain: he must fling to the winds all that which he had.

In so far as he thought of the matter at all, this was the man's humour of the moment. No apology or explanation is attempted; to essay aught in extenuation of his frequent follies were bootless. It has already been insisted upon that he was an Irishman.

Now never was there a man who played to lose who didn't win his point. Colonel O'Rourke's case can be cited as no exception to this rule. Elbow to elbow on one side with an artless old lady from Terre Haute, who risked her minimums with the ferocious jealousy of a miser making an unsecured loan, on the other with an intent little Austrian gambler absorbed in the workings of his "system," the adventurer scattered gold upon the numbered and illuminated gridiron as unconcernedly as though he had been matching shillings, and saw the coins gathered in by the greedy rake as often as the little ivory ball ceased to chatter on the wheel.

For the better part of an hour this continued. And the little group of sycophants which had gathered behind his chair to watch his play insensibly dissipated. A whisper ran through the ranks of the

habitués that the luck of the mad Irishman had turned; and forthwith he ceased to be an object of interest. Only the little Austrian, having risked the number of stakes prescribed by his system for one evening's play, put away his note-book and pencil and, surrendering his place to another, lingered behind O'Rourke's chair, unable to resist the fascination of watching a man who could at once lose money and retain his composure.

At length, inexpressibly bored and too impatient to defer the inevitable by niggardly wagers, O'Rourke ransacked his pockets and placed the proceeds—several hundred francs—I am as ignorant of the amount as he was indifferent to it—upon the red.

There fell a lull, the croupier holding the wheel to permit an unbaked cub of Chicago millions to cover the cloth with stakes too numerous for his half-developed intelligence to keep count of; and the adventurer shifted in his seat, reviewing the assemblage. For some moments, through the mysterious working of that sixth sense which men are pleased vaguely to denominate intuition, he had been subconsciously aware of being the object of some person's fixed regard, that somebody was not only watching but weighing him. He sought the source of this sensation and, for a little time, sought it unsuccessfully. Annoyed, he persisted. He heard the croupier's mechanical "*Rein ne va plus*," followed by the whirring of the wheel, but cared so little that

he would not turn to watch the outcome. Only an exclamation of the Austrian's apprised him of the fact that red had won. He glanced listlessly round to see the money doubled, and let it rest, turning back to his survey of the throng. A moment later his attention became fixed upon two men who stood in the doorway, looking toward him. Again the wheel buzzed, the ball clattered and was still. The word *rouge* among others in the announcement told him that again he had won; this time, however, he did not turn, but, frowning in speculation, stared back at the two.

Stared? Indeed and he did just that. If it was impertinent, sure and were they not staring at him? And who should gainsay an O'Rourke the right to stare at anybody, be he king or commoner? Furthermore, who might these men be, and what their interest in himself?

The one was tall, slender, saturnine; an elegant, owing as much to the art of his tailor and upholsterer as to his own, indisputable, native distinction; a Frenchman—at least of a type unquestionably Gallic. His face was very pale, his fine, pointed moustache very precise, jaw square, forehead high, eyes deep and dark beneath brows heavy, level and black, manner marked by a repose almost threatening in its impassivity.

His companion was shorter of stature, a younger man by at least ten years, rather stout and very

nervous, with a fresh red face marred by hallmarks of dissipation; British, every inch of him.

"That, I'm thinking," mused O'Rourke, "will be the Honourable Bertie Glynn. Faith, he looks the part, at least; 'tis just that kind—inbred, underbred, without brains or real stamina—that would run through a half-million sterling inside a year."

But the other?

"Monsieur," the little Austrian stammered excitedly in his ear, "for you the red has doubled a fourth time."

"Thank ye," replied O'Rourke without moving. "'Twill turn up seven, this run."

The system-gambler subsided, petrified.

But the other? O'Rourke continued to probe his memory. Something in the man's personality was curiously reminiscent. . . . Of a sudden he remembered. The Frenchman had been pointed out to him, years ago, in Paris, as a principal in a Boulevard scandal which had terminated in a duel—a real duel, in which he had been victorious. He was accustomed to anticipate such an outcome of his affairs of honour, however; that was why he had been named to O'Rourke; Des Trebes (that was the name; the Vicomte des Trebes) was a duellist of international disrepute.

"Monsieur," the agitated voice fluttered in his ear, "you have won yet again—for the sixth time!"

"Let it stand for the seventh, *mon ami*."

Why should Des Trebes be watching him so openly, so pointedly? As he watched he became aware that these two, the Frenchman and the Englishman, were not alone; detached though their attitude was, they were evidently of a party of ladies and gentlemen whose gay, chattering group formed their background.

"Monsieur, the seventh turn!"

"Yes, yes."

"*Rein ne va plus*," croaked the croupier.

One of the ladies turned to speak to the Honourable Mr. Glynn. Smiling, he nodded, and offered her an arm. She lingered, addressing Des Trebes. The latter bowed, lifted his shoulders and laughed lightly, plainly excusing himself. A general movement took place in the party; it began to disintegrate, men and women pairing off, all moving at leisure toward the lobby. Des Trebes alone remained. O'Rourke could see that the personnel of the gathering was largely British. He recognised Lady Plinlimmon, whose yacht (he had heard casually) had arrived in the harbour that morning. Evidently this was her party. Another woman's figure caught his attention; her back was turned, but she had an air, a graceful set of the shoulders, an individual pride and spirit in the poise of her head, that O'Rourke could have sworn he knew. He was conscious that he flushed suddenly, that his heart was pounding. He made as if to rise and fol-

low, but was prevented, almost forced back by a hand which the Austrian in his feverish interest had unconsciously placed on the Irishman's shoulder.

"Monsieur, monsieur!" he gasped, his eyes, protruding, fixed upon the wheel. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He trembled as though his own fortunes hung on the change.

Impressed, O'Rourke could not forbear to linger, to cast a reluctant glance at the table.

The size of his pile of gold and notes on the red was a somewhat startling sight to him. His breath stopped in his throat. The ivory sphere was rattling over the compartments to its predestined place. What if he were to win? O'Rourke began to calculate mentally how much he had at stake, how much he might win if his careless prediction that red would turn up the seventh time should come true—lost his bearings in a maze of intricate computation and was on the point of abandoning the problem when black was called.

"Great God!" panted the Austrian, withdrawing his hand.

O'Rourke rose. "The fortunes of war, me friend," said he with a laugh so unforced that it sounded unnatural. He strode away hastily, searching the throng in the lobby for her with whom his mind was occupied to the exclusion of all else.

The system-gambler followed him with a stare of incredulous amazement. "What a man!" said he

to himself, if half aloud. A second later he added: "What admirable acting!"

But he was mistaken. There was nothing assumed in O'Rourke's air of apathy. He was actually quite indifferent and already preoccupied with his new interest—the pursuit of the woman whose unexpected appearance in Monte Carlo seemed likely to upset all his calculations. The sails of the barque of his fortunes had all his life long been trimmed to the winds of Chance; he was well accustomed to seeing them fall flat and flapping, empty, just when a venture seemed most propitious. The loss of money was nothing: the initial amount had been little enough in all conscience, though the major part of all that he possessed; but to him the woman was everything—the world and all.

And now she was gone, had disappeared with her companions! In that instant in which he had turned from her to the table, she had made her escape.

He cursed roundly the weakness that had lost her to him, and passing rapidly through the lobby, left the Casino, pausing before the entrance to look right and left.

There was no sign of what he sought; the party had vanished. And who should say whither?

"Damnation!" he grumbled.

"Monsieur," a voice intruded at his side.

He turned with a start, annoyed. "Well?" he demanded curtly, recognising Des Trebes.

The Frenchman bowed. "I have the honour to address Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke?"

Reflecting that the man might afford him the information he sought, O'Rourke unbent. "I am he, Monsieur des Trebes."

Surprised, the latter lifted his eyebrows, showing even white teeth in a deprecatory smile. "You know me, monsieur?"

"By sight and reputation only, monsieur."

"I am honoured."

"No more than meself, if it comes to that."

The vicomte laughed. "Then I may presume to ask the favour of a word with you?"

"Are ye not having it, monsieur?"

"True . . . But in private?"

"One moment. Ye can do *me* a favour, if ye will. Afterwards——"

"I am charmed."

"'Tis not much I'll be asking ye—merely a question or two. Now that gentleman ye were talking with a while back: isn't he the Honourable Bertie Glynn?"

"The same, monsieur."

"And the lady who spoke to him——?"

"Madame Smyth-Herriott, I believe; I know her only slightly."

"Then ye are not of their party?"

"Party?" Des Trebes appeared perplexed. "What party?"

"Why, Lady Plinlimmon's, of course."

"I have not the honour of that lady's acquaintance, monsieur."

"Oh, ye have not? But Mr. Glynn?"

"Is here with me, monsieur—a flying trip. We ran down from Paris but yesterday. Our meeting with Madame Smyth-Herriott was quite accidental."

"Oh, the divvle!" said O'Rourke beneath his breath. Plainly he might expect nothing more helpful from this man; he had jumped prematurely at a baseless conclusion, it seemed. And by now it was much too late to think of further pursuit. "That is all I wished to know, monsieur," he admitted lamely. "There was a lady in the group whom I thought I recognised. I wished to find her and fancied ye might perhaps direct me. Ye didn't by any chance happen to hear Mrs. Smyth-Herriott say where she was going with Mr. Glynn?"

"Unhappily no, monsieur."

"Very well then. What can I have the happiness to serve ye in?"

The Frenchman hesitated briefly. "This is a trifle public," he suggested. "Will you not be kind enough to walk with me a little distance, while we converse?"

"Gladly, monsieur."

Des Trebes produced a cigarette case, and together, smoking, the two turned their backs upon the Casino and wandered off along the paths of the

terraced gardens. Ever descending, they came at length to the secluded, little lighted and less frequented portions of the grounds which border the waterfront, and presently sat side by side upon a bench, looking out over the harbour. Then and then only did Des Trebes approach his subject—something which he had until now studiously avoided, distracting the not over-patient Irishman by a falling fire of banalities.

"I dare say, Colonel O'Rourke," he suggested, abandoning his mother tongue for excellent English —"I dare say you are wondering——"

"I am that."

"I feared so. But it was essential that we should speak in privacy."

"Yes——?"

"But before I proceed, may I put you a question or two bordering, perhaps, upon impertinence, yet not so conceived?"

"What a long-winded beggar!" O'Rourke commented mentally. "As for that," said he aloud, "'tis impossible for me to calculate the impertinence until 'tis put to me. Eh?"

"Believe me, sir, I am anxious only to avoid indiscretion. It is the question of your identity alone. I desire only to be assured that you are the Colonel O'Rourke I take you to be."

"My faith! And who else would I be, now?"

"There's the bare possibility that two of the same name might exist."

"'Tis so bare that 'tis fairly indecent," chuckled the Irishman. "But fire away."

"I am not mistaken then in assuming that I address the Colonel Terence O'Rourke who was at one time a party to *le petit Lemercier's* mad *Empire du Sahara* project and who later married Lemercier's widow, Madame la Princesse de Grandlieu?"

O'Rourke took a long breath and looked his questioner up and down. "Ye have a very pretty taste in the matter of impertinences," he said gravely. "However, let that pass. I'm the same man."

"A thousand pardons. Caution in matters such as this——" A shrug completed the thought most eloquently. "You can give me proofs of your identity, then?"

"Proofs!" O'Rourke got to his feet. "Believe me, monsieur, ye have all the proof I'm willing to give ye, and that's me last word. If yet find it insufficient, why, then——"

"Pardon!" Des Trebes interrupted, rising. "I am myself more than content. But the Government of France——"

"The Government of France——!" O'Rourke whistled.

"Is more exacting than I. It knows a certain Colonel O'Rourke and him alone does it need."

"The divvle it does! And what will it be wanting with me?"

"I can say at present no more than that I rep-

resent Government in an affair demanding secrecy and despatch. I have a certain diplomatic mission to discharge, and shall have need, monsieur, of a man strong, bold, venturesome, willing to undertake a long and perhaps perilous journey." Had Des Trebes been inspired he could have formulated no speech better calculated to intrigue the Irishman; the merest echo of its import would have fired his hearer's fancy. He added: "And I am authorised to retain for that purpose, should I be fortunate enough to find him unengaged, a certain Colonel Terence O'Rourke."

"Say no more, monsieur. 'Tis enough. 'Secrecy —despatch—a long and perilous journey'! Faith, I'm just your man!"

"You have no other business of the moment?"

"None whatever."

"Then I am indeed fortunate. And now, I presume, you will no longer object to satisfying me as to your identity."

"Not in the least. Although, to be candid, monsieur, I'm not in the habit of carrying me Bertillion record about me. But if ye'll have the goodness to accompany me to the Orient, over there, I'll put your mind at ease before ye can say knife."

Des Trebes nodded. "I should be delighted, but unfortunately"—he snapped the case of his watch —"I have an appointment with a confrére. May we fix a time—in half an hour, say—when it will be convenient for you to have me call at the Orient?"

"In half an hour? I'll await ye then, monsieur."

"Pardon, then, my haste. I am late. I must be off."

The man's hand touched O'Rourke's in the most brief of clasps, singularly firm and cold. The Irishman pondered the sensation for some moments after Des Trebes' hurrying figure had vanished in shadows.

"I don't like it," he averred; "'tis a bad sign—a hand that's naturally cold. I never yet touched one like it that belonged to a man ye could trust. I misdoubt he's sound at the core, Des Trebes. . . . But then, what's the odds? Can I not take care of meself? And since 'tis the Government of France I'm treating with, and himself only the medium—that puts altogether a different complexion on the matter."

He spent the ensuing half-hour loitering in the more populous portions of the grounds, smoking as he strolled, his eyes keen to scrutinise each woman who came his way. But he discovered none resembling her whom he had seen in the Casino.

"Of all things the most improbable," he admitted at length. "Me ears deceived me this evening: is it any less likely that me eyes should play me false? Faith, for the matter of that, 'tis me heart that's doing it all; 'tis sick it is with longing for her, and within another twenty-four hours 'twill be making me think every woman I see is herself! . . . . Bless her sweet face, the darling!"

CHAPTER THREE

As he stepped out of the lift Colonel O'Rourke remarked a light in his room, visible through the transom over the door.

"The *femme de chambre,*" he thought. "Sure and the poor thing's still busy trying to clear up. . . ."

To the contrary, he found the door fast. "'Tis careless she was to leave the light on," he observed, fitting his key to the lock.

If thoughtless in that one way, the woman had fulfilled the letter of her word in the other. It was with comprehensible delight and relief (since he anticipated a caller) that he found the room once again presentable. His multitudinous belongings had disappeared, as if magically they had been stowed away; the curtains of the alcove, decently drawn, concealed the most part of them. The furnishings had been put in place, the bed turned down ready for him to slip into it, the window curtains caught aside to admit whatever air might be stirring—a work of supererogation on that night, O'Rourke considered, noting how straight and still they hung. . . .

But one thing surprised him; and more surprising still was the fact that his ordinarily indifferent eye should have detected it at the first glance. He had indeed hardly entered before he became aware of a square of white paper tucked in the corner of the bureau mirror.

"The divvle, now!" he greeted it. "That's curious. . . . Could one of me many admirers have bribed the *femme de chambre* to bring a note to me?" He chuckled, holding to the light a much-soiled envelope, grimy with the marks of many fingers, liberally plastered with stamps and black with postmarks and substitute addresses, having evidently been forwarded over half the world before it reached the addressee: who was, in a bold hand, "Colonel Terence O'Rourke."

He whistled low over this, examining it intently, infinitely less concerned with its contents than with the manner by which it had reached him. The first postmark seemed to be that of Rangoon, the original address, the *Cercle Militaire*, his club in Paris. Thence, apparently, it had sought him in Galway, Ireland, Dublin, Paris again, and finally—after half a dozen other addresses—"*C/. Mme. O'Rourke. Hotel Carlton, London.*" The London postmark was indecipherable. . . .

He found himself trembling violently. By one hand alone could this have reached him, since the post had not brought it to Monte Carlo. . . .

He recalled that woman's voice which had so stirred him, the woman of the Casino whose bearing had seemed to him so familiar. . . .

Someone tapped on the door; he smothered a curse of annoyance, and went to answer, thrusting the letter into his pocket.

A page announced Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes.

"Show the gentleman up," snapped O'Rourke. He was about to add, "in five minutes," when Des Trebes himself appeared.

"Anticipating that message, monsieur," he said, moving into view from one side of the door, "I took the liberty of accompanying this boy. I am late, I fear."

O'Rourke forced a nod and smile of welcome. "Not to my knowledge," said he.

The Frenchman consulted his watch. "Ten minutes late, monsieur; it is ten minutes past midnight."

"Then," said O'Rourke, "the top o' the morning to ye. Enter, monsieur." He stood aside, closing the door behind his guest. "'Tis no matter; if I thought ye punctual, 'tis so ye are to all intents and purposes. . . . A chair, monsieur." He established Des Trebes by a window. "And a cigarette? . . . A drop to drink? . . . As ye will. . . . And since 'tis to talk secret business that we're here—would ye like the door locked?"

"That is hardly essential." Des Trebes reviewed his surroundings with swift, searching glances. "We are at least secure from interruption; one could ask little more."

"True for ye," laughed O'Rourke. He moved toward the alcove. "Now first of all I'm to submit proofs of me identity, I believe," he added, intending to dig out of his trunk a despatch-box containing his passports and other papers of a private nature.

But Des Trebes had changed his mind. "That is unnecessary, monsieur. Your very willingness is sufficient proof. I have your word and am content."

"That's the way of doing business that I like," assented ORourke heartily, warming a little to the man as he turned back a chair facing the vicomte. "Besides, I quarrel with no man's right to be reasonable. . . . And now I'm at your service, monsieur."

Des Trebes, lounging back, knees crossed, thin white fingers interlacing, black eyes narrowing, regarded the Irishman thoughtfully for a moment. Abruptly he sat up and removed from an inner pocket a long thin white envelope, thrice sealed with red wax and innocent of any superscription whatever.

"Are you prepared, monsieur," he demanded incisively, "to play blindman's buff?"

"Am I what?" asked O'Rourke, startled. Then he smiled. "Pardon; perhaps I fail to follow ye."

"I mean," explained the vicomte patiently, "that I have to offer you a commission to act under sealed orders"—he tapped the envelope—"the orders contained herein."

"And when would I be free to open that?"

"As soon as you are at sea—away from France, monsieur."

O'Rourke considered the envelope doubtfully. "From you, monsieur—from the Government of France, which you represent," he said at length, "yes; I will accept such a commission. France," he averred simply, "knows me; it wouldn't be asking me to do anything a gentleman shouldn't."

"You may feel assured of that," agreed Des Trebes gravely. "Indeed I venture to assert you will find this—let us say—adventure much to your liking. . . . Then you accept?"

"One moment—a dozen questions, by your leave. . . . When must I start?"

"To-morrow morning, by the *Cote d'Azur Rapide*, at ten minutes to eight."

"And where will I be going?"

"First to Paris; thence to Havre; thence, by the first available steamer, to New York; finally, it may be, to Venezuela, monsieur."

"Expenses?"

"I will myself furnish you with funds sufficient to finance you as far as New York. There our consul-general will provide you with what more you

may require. It is essential that your connection with this affair shall be kept secret; should you draw on the government in this country, it would expose you to grave suspicion, perhaps to danger."

"I understand that," assented the Irishman. "But to obviate all danger of mistake, would it not be well to have one of your trusted agents meet me on the steamer and provide me with whatever ye figure I might require? 'Tis barely possible your consul-general might not recognise me in New York. Why should he? I never heard his name, even."

Des Trebes meditated this briefly. "It shall be as you desire, monsieur. It shall be arranged as you suggest."

"Finally, then, what is to be my recompense?"

"That must depend. I am authorised to assure you that in no case will you receive less than twenty-five thousand francs; in event of a successful termination to your mission, the reward will be doubled."

"'Tis enough," said O'Rourke with a sigh; "I accept."

The Frenchman rose, offering him the envelope. "You pledge yourself, monsieur, not to break these seals until you are at sea?"

"Absolutely—of course." O'Rourke took the packet, weighed it curiously in his hand and scrutinised the seals. He remarked that they were yet soft and fresh; the wax had been hot within the half-hour.

"I will do myself the honour of meeting you at the train to see you off, monsieur," said Des Trebes. "At that time, also, will I provide you with the funds you require."

"Thank ye."

Their hands met.

"Good night, Monsieur O'Rourke."

"Good night . . ."

Half way to the door, Des Trebes paused. "Oh, by the way," he exclaimed carelessly, "I believe you are a friend of my old school-fellow, Chambret —*mon cher Adolph?*"

"'Tis so," assented the Irishman warmly. "The best of men—Chambret!"

"Odd," commented the vicomte; "only this afternoon I was thinking of him, wondering what had become of the man."

"The last I heard of him, he was in Algeria, monsieur—with some French force in the desert."

"Thank you . . ." On the point of leaving, the vicomte snapped his teeth on a second "Good night," and swore beneath his breath.

O'Rourke, surprised, stared. The Frenchman was standing stiffly at attention, as if alarmed. His pallor was, if possible, increased, livid—his closely-shaven beard showing blue-black on his heavy jowls and prominent chin. His eyes blazed, shifting from the alcove to O'Rourke.

"Monsieur," he demanded harshly, "what does this insult mean?"

"Mean?" iterated O'Rourke. "Insult? Faith, ye have me there."

Speechless with rage, Des Trebes gestured violently toward the alcove; and O'Rourke became aware that the curtains there were shaking—wavering as though a draught stirred them. But there was no draught. And beneath their edge he saw two feet—two small, bewitching feet in the daintiest and most absurd of evening slippers, with an inch or so of silken stocking showing above each.

Des Trebes' eyes, filled with an expression unspeakably offensive, met the Irishman's blank, wondering gaze. "It is, no doubt," the Frenchman stammered, "sanctioned by your code to have me spied upon by the partner of your liasons."

"But, monsieur——"

"I compliment the lady upon the smallness of her feet, as well as upon ankles so charming that I cannot bring myself to leave without a glimpse of their mistress's features."

Des Trebes moved toward the alcove. Thunderstruck, O'Rourke rapped out a stupefied oath, then in a stride forestalled the man. With him it was as if suddenly a circuit had closed in his intelligence, establishing a definite connection between the three—now four—most mystifying incidents of the evening.

"Less haste, monsieur," he counselled in a voice of ice. His hand fell with almost paralysing force upon the other's wrist as he sought to grasp the

curtain, and swung him roughly back. "Yourself will never know who's there—whoever the lady may be. . . . Ah, but no, monsieur!"

Maddened beyond prudence, Des Trebes had struck at his face. O'Rourke warded off the blow and in what seemed the same movement whirled the man round by his captive wrist and caught the other arm from the back. The briefest of struggles ensued. The Frenchman, taken at a complete disadvantage, was for all his resistance hustled to the door and thrown through it before he fairly comprehended what was happening.

Free at length, if on all fours, he scrambled to his feet to find O'Rourke with a shut door behind him, calmly awaiting the next move.

"Haven't ye had enough?" demanded the Irishman as the vicomte, blinded by passion, seemed about to renew the attack. "Or are ye wishful to be going downstairs in the same fashion?"

Des Trebes drew back, snarling. "You dog!" he cried. Then abruptly, by an admirable effort, he calmed himself surprisingly, drawing himself up with considerable dignity and throttling his temper as he quietly adjusted the disorder of his clothing. Only in his eyes, black as sloes and small, did there remain any traces of his malignant and unquenchable hatred.

"I am unfortunately," he sneered, "incapable of participating in such brawls as you prefer, Colonel O'Rourke. But I am not content. I warn

you . . . My rank prevents me from punishing you personally; I am obliged to fight gentlemen only."

O'Rourke laughed openly.

"But I advise you to leave Monte Carlo before morning. Should you remain, or should you come within my neighbourhood another time—at whatever time—I will kill you as I would a rabid cur—or cause you to be shot."

"There's always the coward's alternative," returned the Irishman. "But ye mustn't forget ye've only the one leg to stand upon in society—your notoriety as a duellist. And I shall take steps to see that ye fight me before another sunset. Else shall all Europe know ye for a coward."

Behind the vicomte the lift shot up, paused, and discharged a single passenger. As swiftly the cage disappeared.

Out of the corner of his eye, O'Rourke recognised the newcomer as an old acquaintance, and his heart swelled with gratitude while a smile of rare pleasure shaped itself upon his lips. He had now the Frenchman absolutely at his mercy.

"Captain von Einem," he said quickly, "by your leave, a moment of your time."

The man paused stiffly, with the square-set and erect poise of an officer of the German army. "At your service, Colonel O'Rourke," he said in impeccable French.

But the Irishman had returned undivided atten-

tion to Des Trebes. "Monsieur," he announced, "your nose annoys me." And with that he shot out a hand and seized the offensive member between a strong and capable thumb and forefinger. "It has annoyed me," he explained in parentheses, "ever since I first clapped me two eyes upon ye, scum of the earth that ye are."

And he tweaked the nose of Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes, tweaked it with a will and great pleasure, tweaked it for glory and the Saints; carefully, methodically, even painstakingly, he kneaded and pulled and twisted it from side to side, ere releasing it.

Then stepping back and wiping his fingers upon a handkerchief, he cocked his head to one side and admired the result of his handiwork. "'Tis an amazingly happy effect," he observed critically—"the crimson blotch it makes against the chalky complexion ye affect, Monsieur des Trebes. . . . And *now* I fancy ye'll fight. Your friends may call upon mine here—Captain von Einem, with your permission."

"Most happy, Colonel O'Rourke," assented the German, blue eyes sparkling in an immobile countenance. "I shall await the seconds of Monsieur des Trebes in my rooms."

The Frenchman essayed to speak, choked with passion, and turning abruptly, somewhat unsteadily descended the staircase.

O'Rourke laughed briefly, offering the German his hand. "'Twas wonderfully opportune, your appearance, captain dear," said he. "Thank ye from the bottom of me heart. . . . And now will ye forgive me excusing meself until I hear from ye about the affair of the morning? I've a friend waiting in me room here. . . . Pardon the rudeness."

CHAPTER FOUR

It would be difficult to designate precisely just what O'Rourke thought to discover when, after a punctilious return of Captain von Einem's salute, he reopened his door and, closing it quickly as he entered, turned the key in the lock.

His mood was exalted, his imagination excited; the swift succession of events which had made memorable the night, culminating with his open invitation to a challenge from the most desperate duellist in Europe, had inspired a volatile vivacity such as not even the excitement of the Casino had been potent to create in him. Of all mad conjectures imaginable the maddest was not too weird for him to credit in his humour of that hour. Eliminating all else that had happened, in the course of that short evening his heart had been stirred, his emotions played upon by a recrudescence of a passion which he had striven with all his strength to put behind him for a time; he had first heard the voice of the one woman to whom his love and faith and honour were irretrievably pledged, he had then seen her (or another who remarkably resembled her) for the scantiest of instants; and finally he had myster-

iously received a letter which could, he believed, have been conveyed to him by no hand but hers. And now he was persuaded beyond a doubt that the person of the alcove, the eavesdropper for whose fair repute he had chosen to risk his life, was nobody in the world but that same one woman.

But more than all else, perhaps, he expected and feared to find the room deserted; for the balcony outside the windows afforded a means of escape too facile to be neglected by one who wished not to be discovered. . . .

His first definite impression was of consternation and despair; for the lights had been shut off in his absence. Then quickly he discerned, with eyes dazed by the change from the lighted hallway to the lightless chamber, the shadowy shape of a woman, motionless between him and the windows, waiting. . . .

An electric switch was at his elbow. With a single motion he could have drenched the place with light. For an instant tempted, some strange scruple of delicacy, abetted it may be by his native love of romantic mystery, stayed his hand.

"Madame," said he, "or mademoiselle, whichever ye may be—the windows are open, meself's not detaining ye. If ye choose, ye may go; but ye'd favour me by going quickly. . . . I give ye," he continued, seeing that she neither moved nor replied, "this one chance. In thirty seconds I turn on the lights."

The woman did not stir; but he thought he could detect in the stillness her quickened breathing.

"What ye've taken," he amended, "I'd thank ye to leave as ye go—if ye came to steal. 'Tis little I have to lose. . . ."

There was no answer.

He touched the switch with an impatient hand, stepped forward a single pace, caught himself up and stopped short, now pale and trembling who had a moment gone been flushed but calm.

"Beatrix!" he cried thickly.

Dumbly his wife lifted her arms and offered herself to him, unutterably lovely, unspeakably radiant. . . .

It were worse than a waste of time to attempt a portrait of her as she seemed to him. Seen through her husband's eyes, her beauty was incomparable, immaculate, too rare and fine, too delicate a thing to be bodied forth in words, dependent upon the perfection of no single feature. Not in her hair, fair as sunlight on the sea, not in her eyes of autumnal brown, not in the wonderful fineness of her skin or in the daintiness of her features, not in the graciousness of her body, did he find the beauty of her that surpassed expression, but in the love she bore him, in the sweetness of her inviolate soul, in the steadfastness of her impregnable heart. . . .

But it's doubtful if ever he had analysed his passion for her so minutely. Mostly, I think, at that

moment of her abrupt disclosure to him, he longed unutterably for her lips and the proffered wreath round his neck of her slim, round, white arms.

Yet he would not. Trembling though he was, with every instinct and every fibre of his being straining toward her, with the hunger for her a keen pain in his heart, he held himself back; or his conception of honour held him back. That which he had voluntarily forfeited and put away from him for his honour's sake, he would not take back though it were offered freely to him.

"So," he said, after a bit, shakily; then pulled himself together and controlled his voice—"So 'twas yourself after all, Beatrix! Me heart told me no other woman could have sung that song as ye did——"

The woman dropped her arms. "Your heart, Terence?" she asked a little bitterly.

"What else? Do ye doubt it?"

She shook her head sadly, wistfully. "How do I know? How can I tell? Surely, dear, no two people were ever happier than we—yet within a year from our wedding you . . . you left me, ran away from me. . . . Why?"

"Well ye know why, dearest, and well ye know 'twas love of ye alone that drove me from ye. Could I let it be said ye had a husband who was incapable of supporting ye? Could I let it be said that your husband lived like a leech upon your

fortunes? Faith, didn't I *have* to go for your sake?"

"No," she dissented with a second weary shake of her pretty head; "I think it was love of yourself, a little, Terence—that and your pride. . . . Why should any of our world have guessed you were not the rich man you fancied yourself when we were married? Who would have told them that your landed heritage in Ireland had turned out profitless? Not I, my dear."

"I know that," he contended stubbornly, "but I know too that sooner or later it would have come out, and they would have said: 'There she goes with her fortune-hunter, the adventurer who married her for her money——'"

"And if so? What earthly difference could it make to us, sweetheart? What can gossip matter to us—if you love me?"

"If!" he cried, almost angrily. "If! . . . Ah, but no, darling! 'tis yourself knows there is no 'if' about it, that I'm sick with love of ye this very minute—sick and mad for ye . . ."

"Then," she pleaded, with a desperate little break in her incomparable voice; and again held out her arms to him—"then have pity on me, O my dearest one—have pity on me if only for a little while."

And suddenly he had caught her to him and she lay in his arms, her young strong body moulded to his, her lips to his lips, her eyes half-veiled, the sweet

fragrance of her—too well remembered—intoxicating him: lay supine in his embrace, yet held him strongly to her, and trembled in sympathy with the deep, hurried pounding of his heart. . . .

In the south the horizon flamed livid to the zenith, revealing a great, black wall of cloud that had stolen up out of Africa; beneath it the sea shone momentarily with a sickly silken lustre. Then the dense blackness of the night reigned again, as profound as though impenetrable, eternal.

Later a dull growl of thunder rolled in across the waste. With it came the first fitful warnings of the impending wind storm.

. . . . .

"'Twas ye who sang to me, dearest?"

"Who else, you great silly boy? . . . And when you followed me to the door, making as much noise as a young elephant, Terence—I was minded to punish you a little, a very little, my dear. So I merely opened mine and closed it sharply."

"There was a woman in the hall——"

"I saw her, dear, and laughed, thinking how puzzled you would be. . . . Was I cruel, my heart? But I did not mean to be. I'd planned this surprise, you know, from the minute I found our rooms adjoined."

. . . . .

"And this letter"—O'Rourke fumbled in his pocket and got it out—"ye brought it to me?"

"It came to me in London, dear, two weeks ago; we were together—Clara Plinlimmon and I—at the Carlton, waiting for her yacht to be put into commission. Meanwhile she was making up the party for this Mediterranean trip. . . . I had no idea where to send you the letter. Have you read it?"

"Have I had time, sweetheart of mine?"

There was an interlude.

In the distance the thunder rolled and rumbled.

Resolutely the young woman disengaged herself and withdrew to a little distance. Flushed and altogether adorable, she stood poised as if for flight, smiling provokingly down upon the man in the chair, her slender arms upraised while she rearranged her coiffure.

"Read, monsieur," she insisted, peremptorily.

"I've better things to do, me dear," he retorted with composure.

"You'll find it interesting."

"I find me wife more interesting than—— How d'ye know I will?"

"Perhaps I have read it."

O'Rourke turned the letter over in his hand and noted what had theretofore escaped his attention —the fact that the envelope, badly frayed on the edges through much handling, was open at the top.

"So ye may," he admitted.

"It was that way when I received it. And I had to read it. How could I help it?"

"Then ye've saved me the bother." He prepared to rise and capture her.

She retreated briskly. "Read!" she commanded. "Read about the Pool of Flame!"

He stopped short, thunderstruck. "The Pool of Flame?" he iterated slowly. "What d'ye know about that?"

"What the letter tells me—no more. What has become of it?"

But he had already withdrawn the enclosure and tossed the envelope aside, and was reading—absorbed, excited, oblivious to all save that conveyed to his intelligence by the writing beneath his eyes.

It was a singularly curt, dry and business-like document for one that was destined to mould the romance of his life—strangely terse and tritely phrased for one that was to exert so far-reaching an influence over the lives of so many men and women. Upon a single sheet of paper bearing their letterhead, Messrs. Secretan and Sypher, solicitors, of Rangoon, Burmah, had caused to be typed a communication to Colonel Terence O'Rourke, informing him that on behalf of a client who preferred to preserve his incognito they were prepared to offer a reward of one hundred thousand pounds sterling for the return, intact and unmarred, of the ruby known

as the Pool of Flame. The said ruby was, when last heard of, in the possession of the said Colonel O'Rourke, who would receive the reward upon the delivery of the said stone to the undersigned at their offices in Rangoon within six months from date. Said delivery might be made either in person or by proxy. With which Messrs. Secretan and Sypher begged to remain respectfully his.

The Irishman read it once and again, memorising its import; then deliberately shredded it into minute particles.

"So it's come," he said heavily, "just as the O'Mahoney foretold it would!"

He sank back in his chair, and his wife went to him and perched herself upon the arm of it, imprisoning his head with her arms and laying her cheek against his.

"What has come, my heart?"

"One hundred thousand pounds," he said. . . . "Treble its worth, double what the O'Mahoney expected. . . ."

"Who is the O'Mahoney, dear?"

He roused. "An old friend, Beatrix—an old comrade. He died some years back, on the banks of the Tugela, fighting with a Boer commando. He was a lonely man, without kith or kin or many friends beside meself. That, I presume, is how he came to leave the Pool of Flame with me." He wound an arm round her and held her close.

"Hearken, dear, and I'll be telling ye the story of it."

Behind them the infernal glare lit up the portentous skies. Thunder echoed between clouds and sea like heavy cannonading. The wife shrank close to her beloved. "I am not at all afraid," she declared, when her voice could be heard—"with you. . . . Tell me about the Pool of Flame."

"The O'Mahoney left it with me when he went to South Africa," explained O'Rourke. "'Twas a pasteboard box the size of me fist, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a bit of string, that he brought me one evening, saying he was about to leave, and would I care for it in his absence. I knew no more of it than that 'twas something he valued highly, but I put it away in a safe-deposit vault—which he might 've done himself if he hadn't been a scatterbrain—an Irishman. . . .

"Then he wrote me a letter—I got it weeks after his death—saying he felt he was about to go out, and that the Pool of Flame was mine. He went on to explain that the box contained a monstrous big ruby and gave me its history, as far as he knew it. . . .

"It seems that there's a certain highly respectable temple in one of the Shan States of Burmah ('tis meself forgets the name of it) and in that temple there's an idol, a Buddha of pure gold, 'tis said. It would be a perfectly good Buddha, only that it lacks

an eye; there's an empty socket in its forehead, and 'tis there the Pool of Flame belongs—or came from. In the old days the natives called this stone the Luck of the State, and maybe they were right; for when it disappeared the state became a British possession.

"In the war of 'eighty-five, says the O'Mahoney, a small detachment of British troops out of touch with their command happened upon this temple we're speaking of and took it, dispossessing priests and populace without so much as a day's notice. The officer in command happened to see this eye in the Buddha's forehead, pried it out and put it in his pocket. In less than an hour the natives surrounded the temple and attacked in force. The British stood them off for three days and then were relieved; but in the meantime the officer had been killed and the Pool of Flame had vanished. . . . For several years it stayed quiet, so far as is known. Then the curse in the thing began to work, and it came to the surface in a drunken brawl in the slums of Port Said. The police, breaking into some dive to stop a row, found nobody in the place but a dead Greek; they say 'twas a shambles. One of the police found the big ruby in the dead man's fist and before his comrades guessed what was up slipped away with the stone. . . . He was murdered some months later in a Genoese bagnio, by a French girl who got away with it somehow. . . . The O'Mahoney

came across the thing in Algeria, when he was serving with the Foreign Legion. He was in Sidi Bel Abbas one night, off duty and wandering about, when he heard a man cry out for help in one of the narrow black alleys of the place. He thought he recognised a comrade's voice, and surely enough, when he ran down to aid him, he found a Dutchman, a man of his own regiment, fighting with half a dozen natives. He was about done for, the Dutchman, when the O'Mahoney came up, and so were three of the Arabs. The O'Mahoney took care of the rest of them, and left seven dead men behind him when he went away—the six natives and the Dutchman, who had died in his arms and given him the Pool of Flame with his last whisper. . . .

"That's how it came to me," said O'Rourke.

"And where is it now?"

"Back in Algeria, if I'm not mistaken. . . . Ye remember Chambret—he was with us in the desert and wanted ye to marry him afterwards? He has it—the dear man; I love him like a brother. . . . He sickened of Europe when he found his case with you was hopeless, and went to Algiers, joining the Foreign Legion."

"But how——?"

"Well, we were fond of one another, Chambret and I. I helped him out of some tight corners and he helped me along when me money ran short—as it always did, and will, I'm thinking. After a while

I got to wondering how much I owed the man and figured it up; the sum total frightened the life out of me, and I made him take the ruby by way of security—and never was able to redeem it, for 'twas only a little after that that I came into me enormous patrimony and squandered it riotously getting married to the most beautiful woman living."

Thunder intervened with resonant reverberations, as though some Titan hand had smitten mightily the sonorous brazen gong of the heavens. . . .

"He warned me to hold the stone," O'Rourke resumed, "the O'Mahoney did, saying that the time would come when some native prince would offer to redeem the Luck of the State as an act of piety and patriotism. He prophesied a reward of at least fifty thousand pounds. And now it's come—twice over!"

"And now what can you do?"

"Do?" cried O'Rourke. "Faith, what would I be doing? D'ye realise what this means to me, dear heart? It means you—independence, a little fortune, the right to claim my wife!" He drew her to him. "Do? Sure, and by the first train and boat I'll go to Algeria, find Chambret, get him to give me the stone, take it to Rangoon, claim the reward, repay Chambret and——"

"And what, my paladin?"

"Dare ye ask me that, madame? . . . Say, will ye wait for me?"

She laughed softly. "Have I not waited, Ulysses?"

. . . . .

"Tell me," he demanded, "have ye talked with anyone about this letter?"

"Only to Clara Plinlimmon!"

"Good Lord!" groaned the Irishman. "*Only* to her! Could ye not have printed broadsides, the better to make the matter public?"

"Did I do wrong?"

"'Twas indiscreet—and that's putting it mildly, me dear. D'ye not know the woman's a walking newspaper? How much did ye tell her? Did ye show her the letter?"

"No." She answered his last question first. "And I told her very little—only about this reward for a ruby I didn't know you owned. We were wondering where to find you."

"And she told no one—or who do you think?"

The woman looked a little frightened. "She told—she must have told that man—Monsieur des Trebes."

"That blackguard!"

"He was with us on the yacht, one of Clara's guests."

"She has a pretty taste for company—my word! How d'ye know she told him? He asked you about it?"

"The letter? Yes. He wanted to know the name

of the solicitors and their address. I wouldn't tell him. I—I disliked him."

"Had ye told Lady Plinlimmon?"

"No . . ."

"Praises be for that!"

"Why?"

"Because . . ." O'Rourke paused, vague suspicions taking shape in his mind. "Why did he ask about Chambret?" he demanded. "How could he have learned that the jewel was with him?"

He jumped up and began to pace the floor.

His wife rose, grave with consternation. "What," she faltered—"what makes you think, suspect—?"

"Because the fellow lied to me about you this very night. Ye were with Lady Plinlimmon in the Casino, were ye not? Faith, and didn't I see ye? I was in chase of ye when the man stopped me with his rigamarole about representing the French Government and having a secret commission for me. Ye heard him just now. . . . And when I asked him was he of your party, he denied knowing Lady Plinlimmon. . . . He made a later appointment with me here, to talk things over. I'm thinking he only wanted time to think up a scheme for getting me out of the way. Also, he wanted to find out where Chambret was. D'ye not see through his little game? To get me away from Monte Carlo by the first morning train, that we might not meet; to get me on the first Atlantic liner, that I might

not interfere with his plot against Chambret. For what other reason would he give me sealed orders? Sealed orders!" O'Rourke laughed curtly, taking the long envelope from his pocket and tearing it open. "Behold his sealed orders, if ye please!"

He shuffled rapidly through his fingers six sheets of folded letter-paper, guiltless of a single pen-scratch, crumpled them into a wad and threw it from him.

"What more do I need to prove that he's conspiring to steal the Pool of Flame and claim for himself the reward? . . . A bankrupt, discredited, with nothing but his title and his fame as a duellist to give him standing: is it wonderful that he's grasping at any chance to recoup his fortunes?" He took a swift stride toward the door, halted, turned. "And young Glynn?" he demanded. "Was he with you, and was he thick with this precious rogue of a vicomte?"

"They were much together."

"Faith, then, it's clear as window-glass that the two of them, both broke and desperate, have figured out this thing between them. . . . Well and good! I want no more than a hint of warning. . . ."

He was interrupted by a knocking. With a start and a muttered exclamation he remembered Von Einem, and stepped to the door and out into the corridor, shutting the woman in.

She remained where he had left her, pretty brows knitted with thought, for a time abstractedly conscious of the murmur of voices in the hallway. These presently ceased as the speakers moved away. She turned to one of the windows, leaning against its frame and staring at the ominous flicker and flare of sheet-lightning which lent the night a ghastly luminosity, making plain the progress of the storm, rendering tawdry and garish and mean the innumerable lights of the gardens.

A cool breeze sprang up, bellying the curtains. The woman expanded to it, reviving in its fresh breath from the enervating influence of the evening's still heat. Her intuitive faculties began to work more vivaciously; she began to divine that which had been mysterious to her ere now. . . .

Far out upon the bosom of the Mediterranean a long line of white water cut the density of the black, spreading, widening, sweeping in toward the land. The lightning grew more intense and incessant, the thunder beating the long roll of the charge. A heavy gust of air chill as death made her shiver. She shrank away from the windows, a little awed, wishing for O'Rourke's return, wondering what had made him leave her so abruptly.

Then suddenly she knew. . . . She could have screamed with horror.

Almost simultaneously the door slammed: her husband had returned. With a little cry she flung herself upon him, clinging to him, panting, sobbing.

"Tell me," she demanded, "what you intend to do? Do you mean to fight him—Des Trebes?"

"In the morning," he answered lightly, holding her tight and comforting her. "'Tis unavoidable; I provoked his challenge. He was obliged to fight. But don't let that worry ye——"

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" She sobbed convulsively upon his breast.

"'Twill be nothing—hardly that; an annoyance—no more. Believe me, dear."

"What can you mean——?"

"That the man will never consent to weapons worthy the name. He values his precious hide too highly, and he's not going to put himself in the way of being injured when he has the Pool of Flame to steal. Be easy on that score, darling—and have faith in me a little. I'll not let him harm me by so much as a scratch."

"Ah, but how can I tell? . . . Dearest, my dearest, why not give it up—not the duel alone, but all this life of roaming and adventure that keeps us apart? Am I not worth a little sacrifice? Is my love not recompense enough for the loss of your absolute independence? Listen, dear, I have thought of something; I will make you independent, I will settle upon you all that I possess. I——"

"Faith, and I know ye don't for an instant think I'd dream of accepting that!"

"But give it up. What is the world's esteem when you have me to love and honour you? . . .

Come to me, Terence. I need you—I need you desperately. I need the protection of your arm as well as of your name. I need—I need my husband!"

"I will," he said gently; "sweetheart, I promise ye I will—in ninety days. Give me that respite, give me that time in which to make or break my fortunes. Give me a chance to take the Pool of Flame to Rangoon—nay, meet me there in ninety days. I will be there, and if I have won, I will come to you as one who has the right to claim his wife; but if I have lost, still will I come to you, a broken man but your faithful lover—come to you to be healed and comforted. . . . Dear heart of me, give me this last chance!"

With an eldritch shriek and a mighty rushing wind the storm broke over the mainland and a roaring rain came down. The lightning became as one livid glare broken by intervals of darkness as negligible as the shadows on a cinemetograph display. Crash upon crash of terrific violence drowned their voices.

Impulsively the Irishman turned off the lights, and, lifting his wife in his arms bore her to an armchair by the window.

The storm waned in fury, passed, died in dull distant mutterings. Still she rested in his embrace, her flushed face, wet with tears, pillowed to his cheek, her mouth seeking his. . . .

Vague murmurings sounded in the stillness, sighs. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

At five in the morning a heavy motor-car of the most advanced type stole in sinister silence out of the courtyard of the Hôtel d'Orient, at the same sedate pace and with the same surreptitious air skulked through the town, and finally swung eastwards upon the *Route de la Corniche*, suddenly discarding all pretence of docility and swooping onward with a windy roar, its powerful motor purring like some gigantic tiger-cat.

It carried four: at the wheel a goggled and ennuied operator in shapeless and hideous garments; in the tonneau its owner, a middle-aged French manufacturer with pouched eyes, a liver, lank jaws clean-scraped, and an expression of high-minded devotion to duty; Captain von Einem in uniform; and Colonel O'Rourke.

As befitted his importance as a principal in an affair of honour, the Irishman had the middle seat, flanked on either hand by his seconds. He sat erect, arms folded, a shadowy smile upon his lips and in the eyes that watched the dawn-tinted waters of the Mediterranean. Now and again he darted sidelong,

whimsical glances at his companions and found them equally hopeless, imperturbable with their look of sanctified solemnity. For no right-minded European, be he either French or German, would be guilty of a sense of humour when about to participate in a duel by the code. O'Rourke's despair of them both was betrayed in the quizzical droop of his mobile lips and the faint knitting of his brows. He could have enjoyed the situation immensely if only there had been someone handy to meet him halfway. But the shadow of Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes' fame as a professional duellist lay stark and dark upon their imaginations. And O'Rourke would have been bored beyond expression had not God sent a dawn of glory to gild the day and dwarf to farcical insignificance the grimly silly combat that had been arranged.

As the car raced on the Irishman's attention ranged the distances and his heart welled with gratitude for a world so beautiful. The sky was like a turquoise cup empty save for a filmy froth of cloud like a tissue of rose petals in the south. The sea lay on his right, a flawless sheet of malachite edged with frost along the shores. Northwards the hills loomed with brooding heads, a meditative brotherhood cowled in purple shadows. The road swung and dipped along the lip of the world, passing orange groves of green and gold, thickets and tangles of subtropical verdure—a bank of bougain-

villea blazing against a wall of green like imperial jade, clusters and avenues of palms. . . . And the rain-washed air was as clean as truth, as heady as youth. . . .

For a single moment the adventurer's happiness was clouded with mutinous impatience with the situation. He was young; he loved and was beloved; the world was gracious, life joyous; he had but to stretch forth his hand to pluck the apple of his fortunes. Why must he risk all this, that men might continue to respect him? Why had he forced himself into this scrape, brought upon himself the necessity of duelling with a dishonoured and honourless rogue? To satisfy his sense of justice, to punish wrongdoers—or to feed his vanity, pamper his temper, sate his craving for excitement? . . .

Perilously on the verge of seeing through himself, he abruptly desisted from introspection, regaining the pinnacle of his optimism without an effort: that is to say, with Celtic ease. The gymnastic feats of his emotions sometimes surprised even himself. . . . Thenceforward he denied care and responsibility. The matutinal event was permitted to disturb his equilibrium not in the least; a passing annoyance, a vexing hindrance, yet a necessary ceremony, it would soon be over and done with. No apprehensions as to its outcome troubled him; he continued in his magnificent self-esteem invulnerable, impregnable, master of his fate, captain

of his soul. With regard to fatalism he was a sublime agnostic; and his self-confidence was preposterous. . . .

At the end of an hour's run, disturbed by one or two absurdly grave conferences between the seconds, in appropriate monotones, the mechanician put on the brakes and slowed down the car, then deftly swung it into a narrow lane, a leafy tunnel through which it crawled for a minute or two ere debouching into a broad and sunlit meadow, walled in by woodland, conspicuously secluded.

The car stopped. Von Einem and Juilliard descended. The operator doffed his goggles, pushed back his cap, and lit a cheerful cigarette. O'Rourke remained in the tonneau, decently reserved but momentarily in danger of spraining the etiquette of the situation by betraying too vivid an interest in the proceedings.

To one side and at a little distance a second motor-car stood at rest; its operator had removed the hood and was tinkering with the motor in a most matter-of-fact manner. In the body of the machine Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes, ostentatiously unaware of the advent of the second party, sat twisting rapier-points to his moustaches and concentrating his gaze on infinity. O'Rourke observed with malicious delight the nose of the duellist, much inflamed.

Advancing from his antagonist's position three

preternaturally serious gentlemen of France in black frock coats and straight-brimmed silk hats waded ankle deep in dripping grass to meet O'Rourke's representatives. Half-way to them Monsieur Juilliard—O'Rourke's Frenchman—remembered himself and came hastily back to discard his motor-cap and assume a stove-pipe hat which he unearthed from a trunk in the rear of the machine. Then he rejoined Von Einem, leaving his principal hugely comforted. O'Rourke, indeed, felt at the moment that nothing on earth could have induced him to go forth to be shot without at least one silk hat to lend respectability to his demise.

The two parties met, saluted one another with immense reserve, and retired to a suitable distance to confer; something which they did wordily, with enthusiasm and many picturesque gestures. At first strangely amicable, the proceedings soon struck a snag. A serious difference of opinion arose. O'Rourke divined that the conference had gone into executive session upon the question of weapons. He treated himself to a secret grin, having anticipated this trouble.

The choice of weapons being his, as the challenged, he had modestly selected revolvers and had brought with him a brace of Webleys, burly pieces of pocket ordnance with short barrels and cylinders chambered to hold half a dozen .45 cartridges. They were not pretty, for they had seen service in their owner's

hands for a number of years, but they were undeniably built for business. And at sight of them the friends of the vicomte recoiled in horror. The surgeon detached himself from the group and strolled off, regarding high Heaven and shaking his head. Von Einem stood to one side, disgusted, wrinkling a scornful nose. The three remaining Frenchmen chattered madly, as noisy as a congress of rooks.

Eventually a compromise was arrived at. Monsieur Juilliard stepped back, saluted, and with Von Einem returned to his principal, his face a mask of disappointment. As for himself, he told O'Rourke, he was desolated, but the seconds of Monsieur des Trebes had positively refused to consent to turning a meeting of honour into a massacre. They proposed to substitute regulation French duelling pistols as sanctioned by the Code. Such as that which Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke might observe in Monsieur Juilliard's hand.

O'Rourke blinked and sniffed at it. "Sure," he contended, "'tis a magnifying glass I need to make it visible to me undressed eye. What the divvle does it carry—a dried pea? What d'they think we're here for, if not to slay one another with due ceremony? Ask them that. Am I to salve the vicomte's wounded honour by smiting him with a spit-ball? I grant ye, 'tis magnificent, but 'tis not a pistol."

Grumbling, he allowed himself to be persuaded. As he had foreseen and prophesied, so had it come

to pass. Yet he had to grumble, partly because he was the O'Rourke, partly for effect. Faith! himself had not got out of bed at that unholy hour to play children's games. Thankful he was that he had not named swords for the combat, else the squeamishness of the vicomte's seconds would have put him to the stern necessity of prodding that gentleman with a knitting-needle. . . . And more to the same effect.

None the less, he consented, and in the highest spirits left the car and ploughed through the lush wet grass to the spot selected for the encounter, in the shadow of the trees near the eastern border of the meadow. Here, the seconds having tossed for sides, he took a stand at one end of a sixty-foot stretch and, still indecorously amused, received a loaded pistol from Von Einem.

Des Trebes confronted him, white with rage, regretting already (O'Rourke made no doubt) that he had not accepted the Webleys. The Irishman's open contempt maddened the man.

But everybody else was very, very hugely distressed. Such lack of respect for his adversary, such unseemly hilarity on the part of a principal, was extraordinarily painful to them all—with the single exception of Captain von Einem, whose attitude branded the affair as neither amusing nor worthy of serious consideration. Juilliard, on the other hand, seemed to be fluttering on the verge of apology.

The surgeon opened his case of instruments and

made a show of bandages. The seconds retired to a perfectly safe distance, Von Einem holding the watch, one of Des Trebes' seconds a handkerchief. The chauffeurs threw away their cigarettes and sat up, for the first time roused out of their professional air of blasé indifference.

"One," cried the German clearly.

Des Trebes raised his arm and levelled his pistol at O'Rourke's head. A faint flush coloured his face, but his eye was cold and hard behind the sight and the hand that held the weapon was as steady as if supported by an invisible rest.

"Two," said Von Einem.

O'Rourke measured the distance with his eye and raised his arm from the elbow only, holding the pistol with a loose grip.

"Three," said Von Einem.

The handkerchief fell.

The Irishman fired without moving. Des Trebes' weapon was discharged almost simultaneously, but with a ruined aim; its bullet went nowhere in particular. The Frenchman dropped the weapon and, wincing, examined solicitously a knuckle from which O'Rourke's shot had struck a tiny particle of skin. His seconds rushed to him with cries, preceded by the surgeon with bandages. O'Rourke gracefully surrendered his artillery to Juilliard, laughed at the vicomte again, and strolled back to the motor-car.

Juilliard and Von Einem presently joined him, the

former insistently anxious to have O'Rourke descend and clasp the hand of fraternal friendship with the vicomte. But the Irishman refused.

"Faith, no!" he laughed. "Niver! I'm too timorous a man to dare it. Sure and hasn't he hugged both his seconds and the surgeon too, already? For me own part I've no mind to be kissed. Let's hurry away before he celebrates further by imprinting a chaste salute upon the cheek of our chauffeur. . . . Besides, I've a train to catch."

CHAPTER SIX

EVENTS marched to schedule; what O'Rourke planned came serenely to pass. He experienced a day as replete with emotions as the night that preceded it and more marked by activity. Nothing hindering, he left the battle-scarred Vicomte des Trebes upon the field of honour at half-past six; at seven forty-five he settled himself in a coach of the *Cote d'Azur Rapide*, en route for Marseilles—a happy man, for he was not alone. . . . At a quarter to one in the afternoon of the same day he boarded the little steamer *Tabarka* of the Mediterranean ferry service; and half an hour later stood by the after-rail of its promenade-deck, watching the distances widen between him and all that he held beloved.

The port of Marseilles—the harbour with its clustered shipping, its acres of blunt iron masts and stumpy funnels, its clumps of soaring wooden spars and labyrinthine webs of rigging, with the city that rose behind all bright and glittering in the sunshine—contracted; outlines blurred, ran into one another; it became as a shadow beneath a

shadow. France itself receded, dwindled, dropped away over the lip of the world until it showed vaguely as a reef of cloud low upon the watery horizon. There remained only the miraculously blue disc of the sea over-arched by the dense blue hemisphere of the skies, the weltering white wake, slowly drifting clouds, gulls wheeling and veering, the *Tabarka* surging southwards, all a-tremble with the vibration of its engines; and the memory of his wife as he had last seen her, only a few minutes before his embarkation—eyes divinely moist and shining, lips divinely warm and quivering, her whole being radiating the passion of her devotion to the man who carried with him the promise of her constancy. . . .

"In ninety days, dear boy. . . . Ah, Terence, Terence, if you should fail me . . . !"

"I shall not fail. . . . Rangoon in ninety days. Dear heart, I will be there. . . ."

As if to feed the hunger of his heart he strained his vision to see the last of the land that held her. At length it disappeared, and then for the first time he consciously moved—drew a hand across his eyes, sighed and turned away.

Picking his way through the cosmopolitan throng of passengers, he went below, found his stateroom, and subsided into the berth for a sorely-needed nap; instead of indulging in which, however, he lay staring wide-eyed at his problem. He had much to ac-

complish, much to guard against. Des Trebes bulked large in the background of perils he must anticipate; O'Rourke was by no means disposed to flatter himself that he had scotched the schemes of the vicomte. He was almost painfully alive to the fact that the Frenchman had stipulated on that farcical exchange of toy bullets, not because he wished to spare his antagonist, not because he would not cheerfully have blown him to eternity, but because he was—in a word—afraid. The Irishman himself had some slight reputation as a man of ready address with all manner of weapons, while the Frenchman was admittedly an indifferent shot; a majority of his victories had been won with the rapier, and while fortuitously he might have slain O'Rourke in a meeting with firearms of sufficient weight, he would have run a greater chance of being killed outright, if not disabled to an extent which would incapacitate himself from further attention to the Pool of Flame. If O'Rourke had not had the foresight to declare for pistols, there might very well have been another ending to that chapter.

Further, the adventurer shrewdly surmised that the bankrupt Vicomte des Trebes had a second string to his bow: should he fail by any mischance to accomplish what he designed with regard to the Pool of Flame, a sovereign salve to his chagrin might well be found in the fortune of Madame O'Rourke, Princesse de Grandlieu. And it would seriously

complicate his wooing if the object thereof happened to be the widow of a man he had killed in personal combat. On the other hand, nothing would be easier than to allow O'Rourke to proceed joyously upon his chosen way until he could be ambushed by a hired assassin at some convenient dark corner of Africa or Asia—ambushed and eliminated, leaving the field clear in two directions.

O'Rourke laughed at this, however sincerely he considered it a possibility. "Let 'em try it," he said aloud. And suddenly, despairing of sleep in his stuffy cabin and rather excited humour, he rolled out of his berth and went on deck.

But this did not occur until several hours had elapsed. He made his second public appearance on the *Tabarka* at the hour of sunset; and in the act of making it, turned a corner and ran plump into the arms of a young person in tweeds and a steamer cap—a stoutish young Englishman with a vivid complexion and a bulldog pipe, nervousness tempering his native home-brewed insolence, the blank vacuity of his eyes hopelessly betraying the calibre of his intellect.

A sudden gust of anger swept O'Rourke off his figurative feet. He stopped short, blocking the gangway and the young man's progress. So this was what had been set to spy upon him!

"Good evening to ye," he said coldly, fixing the Honourable Mr. Glynn with an interrogative eye

that served to deepen his embarrassment and consternation. "I trust I didn't hurt ye, Mr. Glynn."

"Oh no—not at all," stammered the Englishman. "Not in the least. No." He looked right and left of O'Rourke for a way round him, found himself with no choice but to retreat, and lost his presence of mind completely. "I—I say," he continued desperately, "I say, have you a match?"

"Possibly," conceded O'Rourke. "But I've yet to meet him. Of this ye may feel sure, however: if I have, 'tis neither yourself nor Des Trebes. Now run along and figure it out for yourself—what I'm meaning. Good night."

He brushed past the man, leaving him astare in sudden pallor, and went his way, more than a little disgusted with himself for his lack of discretion. As matters turned out, however, he had little to reproach himself with; for his outbreak served to keep young Glynn at a respectful distance throughout the remainder of the voyage. They met but once more, and on that occasion the Englishman behaved himself admirably according to the tenets of his caste—met O'Rourke's challenging gaze without a flicker of recognition, looked him up and down calmly with the deadly ennuied air peculiar to the underdone British youth of family and social position, and wandered calmly away.

O'Rourke watched him out of sight, a smile of appreciation curving his lips and tempering the per-

turbed and dangerous light in his eyes. "There's stuff in the lad, after all," he conceded without a grudge, "if he can carry a situation off like that. I'm doubting not at all that something might be whipped out of him, if he weren't what he's made himself—a slave to whiskey."

For all of which appreciation, however, he soon wearied of Mr. Glynn. During the first day ashore it was not so bad; there was something amusing in being so openly dogged by a well-set-up young Englishman who had quite ceased to disguise his interest. But after that his shadowy surveillance proved somewhat distracting to a man busy with important affairs. And toward evening of the second day O'Rourke lost patience.

All day long in the sun, without respite, he had knocked about from pillar to post of Algiers, seeking news of Chambret; and not until at the eleventh hour had he secured the information he needed. Then, hurrying back to his hotel, he made arrangements to have his luggage cared for during an absence of indeterminate duration, hastily crammed a few indispensables into a kit-box, and having despatched that to the railway terminal, sought the restaurant for an early meal.

In the act of consuming his soup he became aware that the Honourable Bertie, in a dinner-coat and a state of fidgets, had wandered down the outer corridor, paused at the restaurant door and espied his

quarry. The fact that O'Rourke was dining with one eye on the clock and in a dust-proof, dust-coloured suit of drill, was enough to disturb seriously the poise of the Englishman. O'Rourke saw him call a waiter, give him some guarded instructions, and send him scurrying off. Then, seating himself at a table which O'Rourke would have to pass in order to leave, Glynn desired an absinthe drip of a second waiter, and sat contentedly consuming it, his attention divided between the Irishman and the door.

Exasperation stirred in O'Rourke. He eyed the young man rather morosely throughout the balance of his meal, a purpose forming in his mind and attaining the stature of a definite plan of action without opposition from the dictates of prudence. And at length, swallowing his coffee and feeing his servitor, he rose, crossed the room with a firm tread, and came to a full stop at the Honourable Mr. Glynn's table.

Momentarily he held his tongue, staring down at the young man while drumming on the marble with the fingers of one hand. Then Glynn, glancing up in a state of somewhat panic-stricken inquiry which strove vainly to seem insouciant, met the level stare of the adventurer and noticed the tense lines of his lips.

"I—I say," he floundered, "what's the matter with you, anyway? Can't you leave me a—alone?"

"I've been thinking," said O'Rourke crisply, dis-

regarding the other's remark entirely, "that it might be of interest to ye and save ye a bit of botheration to know that I'm going up to Biskra by to-night's train. It leaves in ten minutes, so I'll have to forego the pleasure of your society on the trip."

Glynn got a grip on himself and pulled together the elements of his manhood. He managed to infuse blank insolence into his stare, and said "Ow?" with that singularly maddening inflection of which the Englishman alone is master; as who should say, "Why the dooce d'you annoy *me* with your bally plans?"

"Don't believe I know you, do I?" he drawled.

"I don't believe ye do, me lad."

"Can't say I wish to very badly, either."

"I believe that," O'Rourke chuckled grimly.

The meaning in his tone sent the blood into the young man's face, a fiery flood of resentment.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of you, y'know," he said, bristling. "Of course you're not going to Biskra, or you wouldn't tell me so. But if you do, I shall make it my business to find out and follow by the next train—bringing Des Trebes with me."

"Ah, will ye so? Ye mean to warn me he's in Algeria too?"

"His boat's due now; I'm expecting him at any moment, if you wish to know." O'Rourke's smiling contempt was angering the young man and rendering him reckless. "You'll be glad to know you've

made a dem' ass of yourself—if you really are going to Biskra."

"Praise from Sir Hubert——"

"Oh, don't you think I mind giving you a twelve-hour start; you won't gain anything by it. Y'see I know where you're going, and I know it's not there. If you'll take a fool's advice, you'll turn back now. You'll come back empty-handed anyway. I don't mind telling you that we mean to have that ruby, Des Trebes and I, and we know where it is. You're only taking needless trouble by interfering."

Truth was speaking from the bottom of the absinthe tumbler. O'Rourke's brows went up and he whistled noiselessly, for he realised that at least Glynn believed what he was admitting. "So that's the way of it, eh? I admire your candour, me boy; but be careful and not go too far with it. 'Twill likely prove disastrous to ye, I'm fearing. . . . But tit for tat; ye've made me a handsome present according to your lights, of what ye most aptly term a fool's advice, and 'tis meself who'll not be outdone at that game. For yourself, then, take warning from the experience of one who's seen a bit more of this side of the earth than most men have, and —don't let Des Trebes know ye've talked so freely. He's a bad-tempered sort and . . . But I'm obliged to ye and I bid ye a good evening."

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOUTH of Biskra there is always trouble to be had for the seeking; south of Biskra there is never peace. A guerilla warfare is waged perennially between the lords of the desert, the Touaregg on the one hand, and the advance agents of civilisation, as personified by the reckless French Condemned Corps and the Foreign Legion on the other. Year after year military expeditions set out from the oasis of Biskra to penetrate the wilderness, either by caravan route to Timbuctoo or along the proposed route of the Trans-Saharan Railway to Lake Tchad; and their lines of march are traced in red upon the land.

Toward this debatable land O'Rourke set his face with a will, gladly; for he loved it. He had fought over it of old; in his memory its sands were sanctified with the blood of comrades, men by whose side he had been proud to fight, men of his own stamp whose friendship he had been proud to own. Many a time and oft, since he had resigned his commission in the Foreign Legion to become a wanderer in strange trails, seeking the guerdon of successful adventure, his heart had turned back to the desert in longing.

Now, he went in the flesh more willingly since he scented in the journey a spice of danger. Behind him Des Trebes and Glynn skulked, shadowy figures whose capacity for mischief he could not yet estimate, yet whose malign purpose bulked self-evident to his understanding. Before him the desert waited, alive with perils, cloaked with mystery beneath its pitiless sun-glare. And, somewhere afar in the desert Chambret moved and had his being, a unit of the Legion, a component part of a punitive expedition only recently despatched from Biskra against the Touaregg, bearing with him, if not that priceless jewel itself, at least the secret of the Pool of Flame.

Mentally serene, then, if physically the reverse of comfortable, O'Rourke dozed through the interminable twelve hours of the journey to El-Guerrah; arriving at which place after eight the following morning, he transferred himself and his hand-bags (for now he was indeed travelling light) to the connecting train on the Biskra branch. The latter, scheduled to reach the oasis at four-thirty in the afternoon, loafed casually up the line, arriving at the terminus after dark.

The Irishman, thoroughly fagged but complacent in the knowledge that he had left both vicomte and honourable a day behind him, kept himself from bed by main will-power for half the night, while he made the rounds of cafés and dance-halls, in

search of a trustworthy and competent guide—no easy thing to find.

The French force by then was three days out from the oasis, and no doubt, since it was technically a "flying column," calculated to move briskly from point to point in imitation of Touaregg tactics, hourly putting a greater distance between itself and its starting point. Moreover, the pursuit contemplated by the adventurer was one attended by no inconsiderable perils. If the Touaregg were indeed "up," no living man outside their number might say where they might not be at any given time, whether before, behind, flanking, or five-hundred miles distant from the French expedition. And a small caravan of two or three dromedaries and but two men, such as O'Rourke's must be, could offer no resistance to an attack from the hereditary lords of the land.

Under such conditions the Arab guides to be found in the oasis were nothing keen to risk their lives; yet before midnight, by dint of indomitable persistence, unflagging good-nature and such influence as he could bring personally to bear upon the authorities, O'Rourke got what he desired—a competent guide and two racing camels, or mehera, with a pack animal that would serve their purpose.

By dawn they were ready to start; and so, in the level rays of a sun that seemed a dazzling sphere of intolerable light, poising itself on the eastern rim

of the world as if undecided whether or no to take up its flight across the firmament, the little caravan rocked out into the fastnesses of the desert, the Irishman in the van sitting a blooded mehari as one to the wilderness born.

For the first day or two—barring untoward developments—he would need no guide; the caravan route to Timbuctoo was plain and broadly beaten upon the face of the earth—and well he remembered it! His eyes kindled and unconsciously he threw back his shoulders and drank in the rare dry air, as he looked about and grasped the sweep and vastness of the desert and felt the enchantment of it penetrate his senses. He who has known the desert never quite forgets it; the lure of it is potent even after many years, and men return to it from ordered ways of life, drawn irresistibly by the desire for it—the longing for the heat, the keen hot atmosphere, the silence and the sense of space, the high inscrutable skies. . . .

So with O'Rourke. He rode on mazed in memories, dreamily content, all but forgetful, while the white days sped and the black clear nights fell and followed swiftly into the oblivion of the beckoning West.

On the seventh night they bivouacked hard on the heels of the flying column, having for seven days pursued it this way and that, zigzagging into the heart of the parched land, getting their bearings

and their news of the column from other wayfarers of the caravan routes, whom they raised and hailed as ships raise one another and exchange greetings in far desolate seas.

Now, when they were come within six hours of their goal, reluctantly, long after nightfall, O'Rourke gave consent to halt, conceding the necessity; for weariness weighed upon their shoulders a great burden, and the camels had become unusually sullen and evil-tempered; if rest were denied them presently they would become obstinate and refuse the road.

They paused, then, in the centre of a vast level place filled utterly with darkness as a cup is filled with water, fell rather than alighted from their overdriven beats, ate a scanty meal cooked over a wretched fire of dry camel-dung, and rolled themselves in blankets for a four-hour sleep. There would be a moon in the early morning hours, and with its coming they were to rise again and push their journey to its end.

O'Rourke closed his eyes and lost consciousness with a sensation of falling headlong into a great pit of oblivion, bottomless, eternal. Yet it seemed no more than a moment ere he was sitting up and rubbing sight into his eyes, shaken out of slumber by his guide.

He stumbled to his feet and lurched toward the camels, still but half awake. When his senses cleared

irritation possessed him. His guide had been overzealous. He turned upon the man and seized him roughly by the arm.

"What the divvle!" he grumbled angrily, between a yawn and a chatter of teeth—for the air was bitter cold. "The moon's not yet up!"

"Hush, Sidi!" Something in the guide's tone stilled his wrath. "The Touaregg are all about us. They have been passing us throughout the night——"

"How did ye know?"

"I have not slept, Sidi," said the man quietly; "I had feared this. The moon will be up in half an hour; with that grace and in this darkness we may slip away."

"Ye knew this and did not wake me?"

"There was no need; we could not have moved ere this without detection. Now, they are all a-stir, and we in the night, may pass for them—until moon-up."

The guide turned away to rouse the mehara, prodding them up, mutinous, snarling and ugly. In another five minutes they were again moving forward, O'Rourke riding close beside his guide; otherwise he ran the risk of losing the man in that black hour. They proceeded at a maddening slow pace, the dromedaries pitching and rolling, grumbling and trying to bite the legs of their riders. It seemed hours rather than minutes before the east

glowed pallid behind the wave-like line of the horizon. The Arab bent forward, urging his camel to speed; his employer did likewise. Presently, the light growing brighter, both abandoned the ways of stealth and gentleness and openly lashed the animals. By the time the silver rim of the moon peered over the edge of the east they were pelting on at full speed, as yet, apparently, undetected by the Touaregg.

An hour passed, and the chill in the air became more intense; dawn was at hand. A sense of security, of dangers left behind, came to the Irishman; he began to breathe more freely, though still the polished butt of a repeating rifle swinging from the saddle remained a comfort to his palm. He grew more confident, mentally at ease, seeing the desert take shape in the moonlight and show itself desolate on every hand.

Even as he gained assurance from this thought, the guide turned in his saddle and cried a warning: "The Touaregg!" From that moment on both wielded merciless whips; the mehara sagged lower to the earth, racked over it more swiftly than ever, long necks stretched at length. The pack camel dropped to the rear, unheeded. For out of the moonlit wastes behind them had shrilled a voice, cruel and wild, announcing discovery and the inception of the chase. The fugitives had need of no sharper spur.

A rifle shot rang sharp on the echoes of that cry, but the bullet must have fallen far short. And when O'Rourke found occasion to glance over his shoulder, it seemed to him that the desert teemed with pursuing, phantom Touaregg, unreal and unsubstantial-seeming in the illusion of the light.

But they were far behind, and he took heart of this—heart that he lost the next moment, remembering that his camels were over-worked, while those of the pursuers would undoubtedly prove fresh and unwearied. Nor was there anything he could do save maintain the pace, flee on into the unknown and brave its hidden perils in preference to the naked death that rode behind.

The minutes dragged. When he looked again he fancied that the pursuit had drawn perceptibly nearer. For a time he contemplated the advisability of halting, dimounting, forcing the mehara to kneel, and with their bodies as a shield attempting to stand death off for a little time with the rifles. He relinquished the project with some regret. It was a man's death at worst, if suicidal.

He looked again. This time he could not doubt that the Touaregg had lessened the distance. A moment later, indeed, they opened a brisk, scattering fire—naturally ineffectual, though the bullets dropping right and left in the sand proved that the chase had got within range.

Even with that warning, the end was nearer than

he had dreamed or hoped. It came in a twinkling and as unexpectedly as a bolt out of a clear sky: a flash of fire ahead, a spiteful snap and—*pttt!*—the song of a bullet speeding past his head.

The guide pulled up with a jerk. O'Rourke, reining in desperately, swung his camel wide to avert the threatened collision. Simultaneously the sharp "*Qui vive?*" of a French sentry rang out, loud and sweet to hear.

"Thank God!" said the adventurer in his heart. And aloud, "Friends!" he cried, driving past the sentry in a cloud of dust.

By a blessed miracle the man was quick of wit, and swift to grasp the situation—of which, however, he must have had some warning from the rattle of firing. He screamed something in O'Rourke's ear as the latter passed, and turning threw himself flat and began to pump the trigger of his carbine, emptying the magazine at the on-sweeping line of Touaregg.

The alarm was hardly needed; O'Rourke and the guide swept on over the lip of a depression in the desert and halted in the midst of a camp already quickened and alive with shadowy figures running methodically to their posts, carbines and accoutrements gleaming in the moonlight: men of the camel corps, hardened to and familiar with their work. They buckled down to it in a business-like way that thrilled the heart of O'Rourke. In a trice they were

doubling out past lines of tethered mehara, past the white hillocks of the officers' shelter-tents and, like the sentry, throwing themselves down upon the ground to take shelter of whatever inequalities the face of the desert offered; and their firing ringed the bivouac with a fringe of flame.

O'Rourke slipped from his camel and turned to watch the skirmish.

Massed, the Touaregg, in strength greater than the adventurer had believed—something like two hundred mounted men, in all—charged down upon the camp as if to over-run and stampede it. A gallant show, horses and camels *ventre-a-terre*, rifles spitting, burnooses streaming transparent and arms glittering in the blue unearthly light, they came in a mad rush, with an impetus so great as to seem irresistible.

Yet at the critical moment, when it seemed that of a surety there was no stopping them, they divided and swung round the camp in two wide circles, scattering into open order and firing as they scattered. Here and there a horse fell, a rider threw out his hands and toppled from his saddle, a camel seemed to buckle at full tilt like a faulty piece of machinery; and so gaps appeared in the flying wings.

For the men of the flying column were picked shots. They had need to be, who had such tasks as this to cope with.

Nor—for that matter—were the Touaregg the

only sufferers. Here and there in the camp a man plunged forward in mid-stride, and on the firing line beyond the tents now and again a sharpshooter shuddered and lay still upon his arms. Even at O'Rourke's side an officer was shot as he ran to the front, and would have fallen had not the Irishman caught him with ready arms and let him easily to the earth. As he did so the stricken man rolled an agonised eye upward.

"O'Rourke!" he said between a groan and a sigh.

And O'Rourke, kneeling at his side and peering into his face, gave a bitter cry. For he had found Chambret.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Preparations for breakfast were toward; an aroma of coffee and bacon hung in the still, crisp air. The troopers were bustling about as if nothing had happened, laughing and joking, cleaning rifles, feeding the mehara, striking tents, drawing water from the palm-ringed well round which the camp had been made.

Out of sight beyond the edge of the sunken oasis a detachment was digging shallow trenches for the dead, the thud and scrape of their spades a sinister under-note to the chatter of those who had been spared and were whole. Dull and continuous, the sound struck upon the ear singularly like the tolling of a knell.

A glory of crimson and gold shimmered in the eastern vault of the skies; in the west the grey and purple shades were rolling away almost visibly across the face of the desert; dawn was imminent.

In the open Chambret lay dying, a stark grim figure in the growing light. O'Rourke sat by his side, near the head of the improvised litter, elbow on knee, chin in hand, eyes fixed on the face of his friend.

To his saddened vision, the man's features seemed curiously pinched and shrunken, but little indicative of the strength and comeliness that once had been his. A strong, dark man he figured in O'Rourke's memory, alert and ready, a friend to cherish, steadfast and loyal.

Now . . . It was hard to see him as he was. There were deep hollows beneath the closed eyes, and the lean, brown cheeks had fallen in pitifully; the stern lines of suffering about the mouth and chin and the cold, beaded sweat on the man's brow and temples wrung the heart of the adventurer, though he had seen many men die—many of whom he had cared for more than a little.

Perhaps, however, he was now more intensely moved because this man Chambret, whose passing he was watching, a solitary mourner, had been more to him than a friend, more than an enemy. . . . Inevitably he recalled the unnumbered incidents and episodes which went to prove how strangely interwoven had been the threads of their individual destinies. Chambret it was through whom he had first met Beatrix, Princesse de Grandlieu, Chambret whom first he had been forced to recognise as his most formidable rival for her affection; his first duel had been fought with Chambret—his second also; with Chambret by his side he had fought the fights that stood out most prominently in his memory; he had saved his life, been saved through his intervention;

they had served one another in many a various way. Even when he had married the woman Chambret loved, Chambret had stood by his side. The strength of their friendship had prevailed against even that ordeal. . . . And now the man lay dying, dying needlessly, a virtual suicide who to forget his love for the woman O'Rourke had married had courted death by enlisting as a soldier of France's Foreign Legion in the Soudan: that graveyard of many another brilliant career. . . .

Just before sunrise the man on the litter stirred, moaned, opened his eyes and turned his head to see O'Rourke. He smiled wanly. "*Mon ami,*" he said in tones faint yet thick.

The Irishman rose. "Don't talk," said he. "I'll be calling the surgeon."

But Chambret stayed him with a gesture. "Has he not told you, dear friend?" he asked.

O'Rourke hesitated. "Told me what?"

"That my wound was fatal—mortal? . . . Surely he must have told you. It is so. Presently I die . . . content. . . . Let him be—this surgeon: I am beyond his aid. Attend to me, in my last moments, O'Rourke, my friend."

The adventurer vacillated, torn by an agony of compassion. "I must do something for ye," he said miserably. . . . "I must do something. . . . What can I do?"

"Comfort me." The dying man closed his eyes

and lay still for a little. "You are not gone, O'Rourke?" he asked presently.

"I'm here, be your side, *mon ami.*"

"Tell me . . . of madame . . . your wife. She is well?"

"She is very well, Chambret."

"You have seen her recently?"

"Within ten days."

"You have . . . returned to her?"

"No—and yes. 'Twas not for lack of love for her that I gave her up——"

"Yes," said Chambret impatiently. "That I understand. . . . I comprehend utterly your feeling. . . . But you owe her happiness, though you sacrifice your own—everything—to give it her. She loves you . . . as she might have loved even me, had you not come into her life."

"True. . . ."

"You are about to pocket your scruples that she may have her due portion of happiness?"

"I've promised, Chambret."

"I am glad."

The wounded man panted heavily for a moment, then lay very still. It seemed a long time before he spoke again.

"O'Rourke. . . ."

"Dear friend. . . ."

"It's true, then. . . . I'd wondered. . . . For a little I thought myself dreaming you were by

my side in this hour. . . . O'Rourke—I've not long to live now—your hand."

His strong fingers closed greedily upon the Irishman's.

"She is well, happy . . . I am glad. . . . Do you speak of me together?"

"Very often."

"But she doesn't know. . . . That is best. . . . I should sleep uneasy with the burden of the thought that she knew why . . . why death found me in this spot, this land of devils."

"I think she doesn't even dream——"

"So much the better. . . . But you—what has brought you hither?"

"I—I wished to see ye."

But the dying are oftentimes and strangely endowed with curious insight into matters beyond their ken. Without perceptible hesitation Chambret made this apparent.

"You have come for the ruby," he said with conviction.

"How did ye know?"

"It is true, then? . . . I fancied so; I knew that some day you would come to claim it. You recall telling me the story of the stone? I have not forgotten. . . . So I have kept it all prepared for you to claim. Not only have I designated it your property in my will, but . . . perhaps foreseeing this thing that has happened, I have placed it in a

safe hand to be delivered to you alone upon request."

The voice dropped until it was no more than a feeble whisper and the strong dark hands began to twitch spasmodically—one tightening cruelly about O'Rourke's. The Irishman seemed to see death's hallmark stamped plain upon the face of his friend.

"Chambret," he said huskily.

"Let me finish. I have but little time left to me. . . . This skirmish must have happened earlier than I had thought; for it is still dark, my friend; I cannot see your face. . . . What is the hour?"

"'Tis hard upon the dawn. . . ."

"It is sunset for me. By daylight I shall be . . . No matter. Listen to me, O'Rourke."

"I'm here, Chambret."

"Is there anyone besides yourself to hear?"

"None. . . ."

"Bend nearer to me. . . . The Pool of Flame is in the keeping of my good friend, the Governor-General of Algeria. It is all arranged. When I am gone, take my signet ring, tell him your name, and demand the package—a small morocco-leather box, wrapped in plain brown paper and superscribed with my name and yours. He knows nothing of its value, save that it is great, and will deliver it to you and only you without question. . . . That is all."

The hand that clasped O'Rourke's was like ice.

"Chambret!"

"Beatrix. . . ."

The cold fingers relaxed. Gently O'Rourke disengaged his hand and put it to the pitiful, torn bosom of the man who had died with his wife's name upon his lips.

There was no motion, not a flutter of breath nor a throb of the heart, in Chambret's body.

O'Rourke rose and stood above the litter, with sorrowing eyes staring blankly out across the empty, barren, desert waste.

With a bound the sun cleared the horizon, and another day crashed across the firmament.

CHAPTER NINE

Shortly before midnight the tri-weekly train from Constantine to Algiers pulled up over an hour late at the town of El-Guerrah. It took up a single passenger, discharged none, and presently thundered on westwards, rocking and jarring over a road-bed certainly no better than it should have been. Such, at least, was the passenger's criticism, as, groaning in anticipation of the long night of discomfort ahead of him, he disposed himself and his belongings about the cushions of the first-class compartment which he occupied in solitary grandeur.

O'Rourke had no intention of leaving anything undone that might tend to mitigate the terrors of the journey. Removing his coat, he rolled and pounded it into a passable pillow, which he placed at one end of the rear seat. Then, opening his handbag, he exchanged shoes for worn slippers, produced a flask, a pipe, a fat tobacco-pouch and matches, and, stretching himself at length upon the cushions, commended his soul to fortitude and his mind to thought.

Five days had elapsed since that morning in the oasis. In the interval he had again dared the dan-

gers of the desert, returning to Biskra alone by a route more direct than that which had brought him up with the flying column. Discharging the guide with a gratuity larger than his ebbing means warranted, he had proceeded to El-Guerrah by the first daily train, and so now found himself on the direct line of communication with Algiers and the Governor-General.

He was weary, fagged by the unmitigated strain of the desert sortie, but mentally fairly content. The five days lapsed had taken the keen edge off his mourning; O'Rourke had seen too much of death in battle to remain for long forcibly impressed by it, even when it touched him so nearly as now. The sad memory of Chambret he served as he served habitually all irreparable matters, thrusting it into the storehouse of his reminiscences, out of his immediate thoughts. His chiefest concern now lay with the future and the Pool of Flame; both bulked large upon the horizon and were at once the architects and the nuclei of a thousand different plans of action.

So far, the affair had worked smoothly; he anticipated little trouble. Des Trebes and the Honourable Mr. Glynn he disregarded entirely, eliminating them as real factors in his schemes. He had seen nothing of either at Biskra, and very naturally held that they having failed to intercept him before he could reach Chambret, had abandoned their conspir-

acy, or, at worst, turned their attention from himself to the man of whose death they remained in ignorance.

It was now become the Irishman's part to return to Algiers as inconspicuously as possible, secure an interview with the Governor-General, and take leave of the land at the earliest practicable moment.

So thinking he drowsed, and in the course of time lulled by the hammering of a flat-wheel at the forward end of the coach, fell asleep. In common with most men who are hardened to the open, he had the happy faculty of sleeping when and where he would, of obtaining the greatest possible amount of rest under the least favourable auspices. By habit, likewise, he slept lightly and could awaken himself at any given hour, by prearrangement with his subconsciousness. But this night he wakened suddenly and without design after a nap of some two hours or so, to a confusion of impressions: that the train had stopped; that someone had invaded his compartment; that a cold blast was blowing across his wrists. Bewildered and not half master of his senses, he started up and fell back with a thud, assisted to resume a recumbent position by a heavy blow upon his chest, delivered by some person for the moment unknown. Simultaneously he was aware of a clicking sound, followed by the sensation of being unable to move his feet; and then, the clouds clearing from his understanding, he realised that the cold upon his

wrists was that of steel. With handcuffs also on his ankles, he lay helpless, unable even to protest because of a cloth wadded tightly into his mouth and a firm hand that prevented its ejection.

Other hands were rifling his pockets, swiftly but after a bungling fashion. The train, having paused briefly at Setif (he afterwards located the station by conjecture), began to move again, was presently in full thundering flight. Abruptly the examination of his person—which was so thorough that it included the opening of his shirt to assure the thieves that he carried nothing in the shape of a money-belt—was concluded and the adventurer was roughly jerked into a sitting position. At the same time his gag was removed.

He gasped, blinked, coughed, and rolled a resentful eye around the compartment. "Be the powers!" he said huskily; and no more. At first glance it became apparent that he had miscalculated the audacity and resource of the vicomte and Mr. Glynn. They had literally caught him napping.

The Honourable Bertie, O'Rourke discovered kneeling in the act of turning the adventurer's travelling gear inside out; at least, he seemed to be trying to do so. Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes on the contrary was seated at ease, facing O'Rourke, a revolver on the cushion beside him, his interest concentrated, not upon his captive, but upon his collaborator. O'Rourke remarked an expression on the French-

man's face, a curious compound of eagerness, triumph and apprehension.

Without noting the Irishman's ejaculation, he addressed Glynn: "Find it?"

"No—worse luck!" grumbled the Englishman, rising and kicking the hand-bag savagely. "There isn't so much as a scrap of paper anywhere about him."

The vicomte favoured O'Rourke with a vicious glance, muttering something about a thousand devils. The Irishman, quick to grasp the situation and inwardly exulting, acknowledged Des Trebes' attention with a winning smile.

"Good evening," he said, and nodded amiably.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the Honourable Bertie, unhandsomely. "Where's that letter?"

O'Rourke chuckled. "Ye're a hard loser, me bright young friend," he commented. "I thought Englishmen always played the game as it laid."

Glynn grunted and flushed, shamefaced, but the Frenchman cut short the retort on his lips by a curt repetition of Glynn's own question:

"Where's that letter, monsieur?"

O'Rourke glanced at him languidly, yawned, and smiled an exasperating, strictly personal smile. Then significantly he clinked the handcuffs until they rang on wrist and ankle.

"Answer me!" snarled the vicomte, picking up his revolver.

"Divvle a word," observed O'Rourke, "will ye get from me if ye shoot me dead, monsieur le vicomte. Put down your pistol and be sensible."

Des Trebes' face darkened, suffused with the blood of his rage. Yet the man asserted that admirable control of self which he was able to employ when it suited his purposes. Evidently, too, he recognised the cold common-sense of the wanderer's remark. At all events he put aside the weapon.

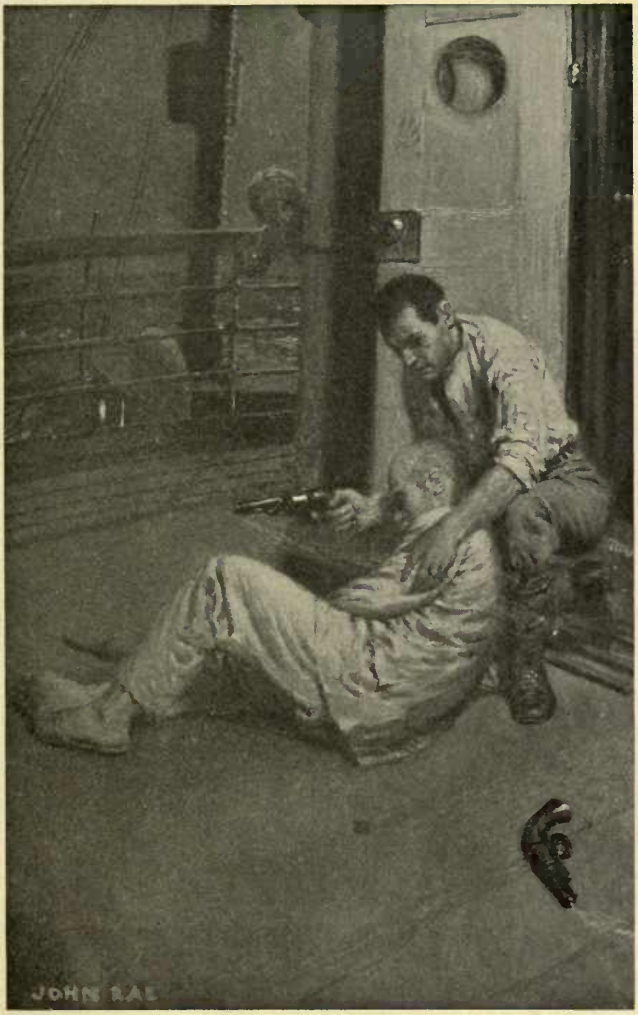
"Where's the letter?" he demanded again, more pacifically.

Again O'Rourke yawned with malice prepense, yawned deliberately and exhaustively and dispassionately. "Not a word," he volunteered at length, "until ye loose me hands and feet. Which," he added, "ye need not hesitate to do, for I'll not strike back—unless ye crowd me."

The vicomte scowled darkly for a moment, plainly dubious. Then presumably upon the consideration that he could trust O'Rourke's word and that most assuredly he would learn nothing from him until his request was complied with, he growled an order to Glynn to unlock and remove the handcuffs. The Englishman obeyed.

Free, O'Rourke stretched himself, rubbed his wrists, and observed a collection of his pocket hardware lying upon the seat by him, thrown aside by Glynn in his disgust at not finding what he sought.

"Ye'll not be wanting to deprive me of these few



"His dominant emotion of the moment, an intense and pitiful solicitude for the dying man, threw him off his guard" (*Page* 250)

trifles, me gay highwaymen, I'm thinking?" he inquired placidly of the pair. "If ye've no objection I'll make so free as to take back me own."

"Take what you want," returned Des Trebes in an ugly tone. "But—I give you three minutes to tell me where you have put that letter."

"Indeed? Your courtesy overpowers me." The Irishman took up his watch and calmly made a note of the hour—hard upon three in the morning; then, with easy nonchalance stowed it away with the rest of the miscellaneous collection—the knives, coins and keys, his wallet, tickets and so forth.

"Your time," the voice of the vicomte interrupted this occupation, "is up." He fingered his revolver. "Where is that letter? I am losing patience."

"Where rust nor moth cannot corrupt nor thieves break in to steal," O'Rourke misquoted solemnly. "Steady. Don't call names—or I'll forget meself. I mean that the letter is in fragments, scattered to the four winds of heaven, destroyed. There ye have your answer. Ye fools, did ye think I would carry it about me?"

"By God!" said Glynn tensely. "No—don't shoot him, Des Trebes! He's telling the truth. Make him tell what was in the letter."

"I am afraid 'tis useless," O'Rourke mocked them. "I have forgotten the contents. What use to me to remember?" he demanded, inspired. "What made

ye think I would have it at all? Sure, and the letter was properly Chambret's. Why would I not turn it over to him?"

"Oh, cut it!" Glynn interrupted impatiently. "We know he's dead. The news was heliographed in from the column day before yesterday."

"Quite so. Yet, if ye know so much, if—as I gather—ye suspect that Chambret turned over this precious jewel to me, why do ye not demand it as well as the letter? Not that I have either."

"Because we jolly well know you haven't got the ruby," blurted the Englishman.

"Be quiet!" snapped the vicomte.

"Quite right," echoed O'Rourke with assumed indignation. "Be silent, Bertie. Children should be seen and not heard. Mind your uncle." And, "Oho!" he commented to himself. "And they knew I didn't have the Pool of Flame! Let me think. . . . Oh, faith, 'tis just bluffing they are!"

"You say," the vicomte continued slowly and evenly, "you've destroyed the letter."

O'Rourke took up pipe and tobacco. "I told ye," he replied, filling the bowl, "that the letter was nonexistent. Now, me man," he continued, with an imperceptible change of tone, "drop the bluff. Turn that pistol away from me. Well I know that ye won't shoot, for if ye did ye would put beyond your reach forever the information that would win ye the reward—always providing ye had got possession of

the ruby, be hook or crook. 'Twould be crooks, I'm thinking."

He lit a match and applied the flame to the tobacco. "There's me last word on the subject," he added indistinctly, puffing and eyeing the pair through the cloud of smoke.

The revolver wavered in the vicomte's hand; he was livid with passion and disappointment, yet amenable to reason. Glynn bent and whispered briefly in his ear, and the Frenchman, nodding acquiescence, laid aside his weapon. The Honourable Bertie continued to advise with him in whispers until O'Rourke, though quite at loss to understand this phase of the affair, saw that their attention was momentarily diverted and, with a swift movement, leaned over, snatched up the revolver and, with a flirt of his hand, flung it out the window.

Glynn started back with an oath, his hand going toward his pocket; but O'Rourke promptly closed with him. A breath later a second pistol was ejected from the carriage and the Englishman was sprawling over the knees of the vicomte.

They disengaged themselves and, mad with rage, started up to fall upon and exterminate the wanderer. I think it must have been the very impertinence of his attitude that made them pause in doubt, for he had resumed his seat as calmly as though nothing at all had happened and was pulling soberly at his pipe. As they hesitated he removed the latter

from his lips and gestured airily with the stem. "Sit ye down," he invited them, "and take it easy, me dear friends. The michief's done, and naught that ye can do will repair it. Faith, I said I'd not strike back unless ye crowded me. I remember me words to the letter. Well, your guns made a crowd out of this happy reunion. I've merely dispensed with them; I call ye both to witness that ye have neither of ye suffered. Sure, I'm as peaceable as any lamb. Sit down, sit ye down and take it like little men. The situation's unchanged, save that I've put temptation out of your reach."

And as they wavered, plainly of two minds, O'Rourke clinched the argument of his attitude. "I beg to call your attention," he remarked, "to the fact that ye have left me own brace of revolvers here at me feet, when ye so joyously turned me bag inside out. I'm not touching them, mind ye, but mind ye further: I'll brook no nonsense. If ye make a move as if to attack me, I'll . . . There! That's much better. Wise lads ye are, both of ye: graceful in defeat. Let me see: We've a long ride together, though ye did come uninvited. I trust ye will help me beguile the tedium with society chatter, me friend," with a twinkle at the discomfited vicomte. "I'm in danger of forgetting me manners. Pardon me, I pray, but—but I trust your nose is convalescing?"

In high feather with himself, O'Rourke entertained

his companions with a running fire of pleasantries for the balance of the darkened hours. And he touched both more than once with the rapier-point of his wit and irony, and had the pleasure of seeing both squirm in impotent rage. They cut wretched figures, two against one, yet failures, while he taunted them in one breath, with the next declared himself their captive. Toward the end the reserve which the vicomte imposed upon the Honourable Bertie was worn down: the Englishman turned with raw nerves upon his tormentor.

"You damned ass!" he stammered, all but incoherent. "You sit there and—and gloat, damn you! When all the time we've got the upper hand!"

"Be quiet!" interposed the vicomte.

"I won't!" raged the honourable. "He thinks himself so infernally clever! What 'dyou say, you Irish braggart, if I told you you'd never see the Pool of Flame again?"

"I'd say," returned O'Rourke, "that you were either lying or a fool. In either case a fool. If, as ye seem to be trying to make me believe—which I don't for one instant—ye have succeeded in stealing the Pool of Flame, I'll hunt the pair of ye to the ends of the earth, if need be."

He eyed them reflectively during a moment or two made interesting by Glynn's desperate attempts to blurt out indiscretions against the prohibition of the vicomte: something which the older man enforced

crudely by clapping his hand across the Englishman's mouth, as well as by whispering savagely in his ear.

"But there'll be no need," continued the Irishman, when Glynn was calm. "Let's consider the matter dispassionately, presupposing that ye have the stone. Well, what then? Ye dare not attempt to sell it—'twould result in instant detection. It would not pay ye to have it secretly cut up into smaller stones—the loss in value would be stupendous, the whole not worth your while, as I say. Ye cannot take the Pool of Flame (don't get excited: I'm not going to tell ye where) to claim the reward, for ye don't know where to go. 'Tis a white elephant it would be on your hands."

"It does not seem to strike monsieur that there are other ways of finding out who offers the reward," the vicomte suggested icily.

"I can see ye wandering around asking somebody please to relieve ye of the Pool of Flame and pay ye a commission. I wonder how long ye think ye'd last. But 'tis no use trying to hoodwink me: I don't believe one word ye say. I'll wait until I find out the truth before I bother meself with ye."

There fell a silence then, O'Rourke wrapped in thought if watchful, the Honourable Bertie sulky, Des Trebes imperturbable. Shortly afterwards the train stopped at Beni-Mancour, and here the two offered to leave. O'Rourke interposed no objection:

he was glad enough to be rid of them, to have a chance to sit and smoke and think it out.

Their persistence in hinting that they had gained possession of the ruby perplexed and discomfited him. He did not believe it; 'twas inconceivable: yet—he had known stranger things to happen. Still, without a clue, to have stumbled upon the secret, to have made off with it from under the very nose of the Governor-General——! No; it was not reasonable to ask him to believe all that.

Nevertheless, when he arrived at Algiers, his anxiety had grown so overpowering that, waiting only to assure himself that at Beni-Mancour Des Trebes and Glynn had merely moved to the compartment behind, he called a cab and desired to be conveyed posthaste to the Place de la Government.

CHAPTER TEN

It was high noon when O'Rourke drove up before the Palace of the Governor-General. Weary, dusty and travel-stained as he was, he hesitated no instant about sending in his name and requesting an interview with the representative of France's sovereign power.

Disappointment awaited him at the very outset: disappointment in the shape of word that his excellency was away. But the name of O'Rourke was one well and favourably known in the province, and secured him an invitation to ascend to the Governor's office and state his business—if he cared to do so—to the gubernatorial secretary.

Upon consideration he accepted, and a little later was seated in a broad, low, cool room in the old Moorish palace, the affable secretary—a young, lively and engaging Frenchman—solicitously sounding him as to his errand.

It was obviously the office of a man of great affairs, presenting an eminently business-like look for all its Oriental setting. To one side, set in the solid masonry of the wall, was a massive safe with doors ajar, exposing a cavity well stocked with documents.

It occurred to the adventurer that such a safe might easily have been the place of security selected by the Governor-General for anything he held in trust. He built upon it a theory whilst he listened—nor lost a point—and replied to the secretary.

The latter regretted excessively that his excellency was absent: his excellency would undoubtedly be desolated when he returned and found he had missed Colonel O'Rourke.

"He'll be back soon, monsieur?"

"Alas, no!" with a shrug. "He is *en route* for Paris—possibly arrived by this moment—on matters of state."

"And he left?"

"Several days since, monsieur."

"You know nothing of this package, indorsed with the name of Monsieur Chambret?"

To the contrary: the secretary knew it very well. He could place his hand upon it at any moment—monsieur would appreciate that, he durst not surrender it without the Governor's authority.

O'Rourke drew a long sigh of relief and was abruptly conscious of fatigue and a desire to get away and rest.

"I'm obliged to ye," he said slowly, rising. "I'll have to wait until the Governor returns, I presume. . . . By the way, are ye be any chance acquainted with Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes?"

But certainly; the vicomte was a great friend of

his excellency's. He had dined with his excellency something over a week since, just prior to the latter's departure.

"And I take it ye have seen nothing of the gentleman since?"

"On the contrary, monsieur: the vicomte called here but two days ago." It appeared that he had desired some trifling information, with which the secretary had obliged him.

"Ye didn't happen to leave him alone in this room?"

The secretary, plainly much perplexed by this odd catechism, admitted that such had been the case; the pursuit of the desired data had necessitated his absence from the Governor's room for a matter of some ten minutes.

"But ye say ye can put your hand on this package?"

"But certainly, monsieur."

"Would ye mind making sure 'tis safe? 'Twould save me a deal of waiting, perhaps——"

With alacrity and a smile that deprecated his visitor's anxiety over so trifling a matter, the secretary rose, went to the safe and confidently enough thrust a hand into one of the pigeon-holes. The hand came forth empty. A frown of bewilderment clouded the secretary's face. "It must be here," he announced with conviction. "It was in plain sight and labelled with the name of Monsieur Cham-

bret . . ." He turned. "If Monsieur le Colonel will but return in half an hour, I undertake then to show him the packet itself. I shall by then have found it—but assuredly!"

"Ye are very courteous, monsieur. I will return."

This he did—in two hours. The packet had not been found; the secretary, in a flutter of nerves, confessed that through some culpable negligence, it must have been misplaced. An extended search was even then in progress. It would surely come to light before evening.

"Thank ye; I shan't be back," returned O'Rourke grimly; and went away, downcast for the first time since the inception of the adventure. "Faith! and to think I would not believe the truth when they slapped me face with it! And all the time, belike, 'twas in the vicomte's own pocket! . . ." But he had no vocabulary adequate to the task of expressing his self-contempt.

Disconsolate, conceiving that he had proven himself a blind, egregious fool, he plodded with heavy steps and a hanging head back to his hotel; where the crowning stroke of the day was presented to him in the shape of a note, by the hand of a black Biskri porter.

"Monsieur le Colonel Terence O'Rourke. Be hand," he conned the address. "Faith, and what's this?"

If Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke will do Monsieur des Tresbes the honour of dining with him, at seven for seven-thirty this evening, at the Villa d'Orléans, St. Eugène, an arrangement satisfactory to both himself and Monsieur le Vicomte may be consummated.

R. S. V. P.—The bearer waits.

A trap? A subterfuge? A trick to throw him off the scent whilst the two blackguards escaped with their booty? The adventurer frowned darkly over it, dubious. Then, in a flush of recklessness, he seized a sheet of paper from a near-by desk, scrawled a formal acceptance of the strange invitation, and handed it to the Biskri boy. "All to gain, naught to lose," he summed up the state of mind which had dictated his response; and at six-thirty, with brow and eye serene, he left the hotel in a carriage bound for the suburb of St. Eugène—and heaven knew where besides!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Villa d'Orléans proved to be a handsome house of white stone, situated in extensive and well-groomed grounds, on a height outside the town, overlooking the Mediterranean. So complete and elegant seemed the establishment, indeed, viewed from without or within, that O'Rourke's suspicions were stimulated and his certainty that he was being played with resolved into a pretty definite conviction, as he waited in the broad hallway. It was inconceivable that a man like Des Trebes, so reduced as to be under the necessity of stealing—even of stealing so considerable a sum as a hundred thousand pounds—could maintain so imposing an establishment.

His uneasy conjectures were interrupted when the vicomte appeared to welcome his guest. Suave, dressed properly for the occasion, showing traces neither of fatigue nor of his antipathy for O'Rourke, blandly ignoring the peculiarities of the situation which his own inexplicable invitation had created, he presented himself in the guise of a gracious host. Nature had fitted him to play such a rôle with unquestionable aplomb, when he cared to; only

now and then in his speech could be detected the strain of antagonism and nervousness underlying his flowery periods.

"Monsieur," he declared, bowing to O'Rourke (but with a care not to offer his hand), "overpowers me with his condescension and punctuality. I can only regret"—with a significant glance at the bulge of the adventurer's coat—"that he thought it wise to come armed."

"'Tis a habit I find it hard to break meself of." O'Rourke offered the inadequate explanation in a dry and coolish tone. He was not in the humour for such play-acting as the vicomte's; it suited his mood best to be blunt, pending the disclosure of Des Trebes' intentions.

"It was unnecessary, I assure monsieur."

"Faith, I'm convinced 'twill prove so."

Tactfully the vicomte digressed from the unpleasant topic. "I have asked you here, monsieur," he said with an air of deprecation, "to confer with me on business *after* we have dined. I trust the arrangement suits your convenience."

"I'm content, monsieur."

"I regret that circumstances prevent me from receiving you under my own roof-tree. The Villa d'Orléans is the property of a dear friend, merely loaned me during my stay in Algiers."

"Ye're fortunate in your choice of friends."

Over his next remark Des Trebes faltered a trifle,

with a curious smile that O'Rourke failed to fathom. "Monsieur Glynn," he said, "is—ah—a trifle indisposed—the sun. Nevertheless, I believe he will join us during dinner, if you will be so kind as to excuse him——?"

"I could do very well without him."

The vicomte caught the eye of a servant, and, "Dinner is announced," he said. "Do me the honour to accompany me to the table."

It was a strange meal: the strangest, O'Rourke thought, he had ever sat through, and he had dined in many a various, curious way in his time. The food was perfection, the service excellent, the wines a delight. Over across the gleaming cloth the vicomte sat, accomplished, imperturbable, a moderately fascinating conversationalist, his ready wits and tongue illuminating every topic that they touched upon. Yet—now and again—his eye darkened as it flitted across the Irishman's face, now and again the momentous nature of his scheme scratched the polished surface of the man of the world, betraying the malignant and ruthless nature beneath.

In the course of time, as the vicomte had predicted, the Honourable Bertie joined them; and on sight O'Rourke diagnosed the "indisposition" as plain intoxication. The Englishman was deep in his cups, far too deep to ape the urbanity of his host. He favoured O'Rourke with a curt nod and a surly look, then slumped limply into a chair and called for

champagne, which he drank greedily and with a sullen air, avoiding the vicomte's eye. Before dessert was served he passed into a black humour, and sat mutely glowering at his glass (what time he was not unsteadily filling it) without regard for either of his companions.

When the cloth was cleared and the servants had withdrawn, Des Trebes definitely cast aside pretence. A cigarette between his lips, he lounged in his chair, eyelids drooping over eyes that never left his guest's while either spoke. A cynical smile prefaced his first words.

"So," he said, "the farce is over. Some regard for the conventions was necessary before the servants of my friend, the owner of this villa. Now, we can be natural, Monsieur le Colonel."

"Be all means; I cannot say I found the play diverting, despite the skill of your friend's chef. I gather ye wish to get to business? Well—I'm waiting." O'Rourke pulled at a cigar, honouring the man with cat-like attention. He had no longer to watch the honourable; the latter had wilfully relieved him of the necessity.

"You have been, then," pursued the vicomte, without further circumlocution, "to the palace of Monsieur le Gouverneur-Generale?"

"I have—unfortunately a few days too late, it seems."

"You are satisfied——?"

"I'm satisfied that the Pool of Flame has been stolen."

"Then you will probably believe me when I declare myself the malefactor. It was an easy matter: I purposely brought up the name of Chambret in conversation with the Governor and by him was informed of the existence of the packet—which, of course, I had already surmised. Afterwards . . . the secretary was absent, the safe open, the name on the packet stared me in the face. What could I do?"

"Precisely. I'm convinced that, being what ye are, ye did only what ye could."

The vicomte bowed, amusement flickering in his glance. "Touched," he admitted. . . . "Well . . . I have the jewel, you the information."

"And ye have to propose——?"

"A plan after your own heart: I do your courage the credit to believe it, monsieur. With another man, whom I had studied less exhaustively, I should propose a combination of forces, a division of profits." O'Rourke made an impatient gesture. "But with you, Colonel O'Rourke, no. I esteem your address and determination too highly and—pardon me if I speak plainly—I despise and hate you too utterly to become willingly your partner."

"Go on—I begin to like ye better. Ye grow interesting."

"That does not interest me. . . . The situa-

tion, then, is simplified. Essentially it involves two propositions: first, we cannot combine; second, divided we both fail. While both of us live, *mon colonel*, the Pool of Flame will never earn its value."

"'Tis meself takes exception to that. Let me once get me hands on the stone, monsieur, and I'll back meself against a dozen vicomtes—and honourables."

"While I live," the Frenchman stated, unruffled, "you will not touch the Pool of Flame; while you live, I cannot dispose of it to the best advantage. It would seem that one or the other of us must die."

"I am armed," remarked O'Rourke slowly, "if ye mean ye've brought me here to murder me——"

"Monsieur speaks—pardon—crudely. I asked you, you came of your own will—to fight for the Pool of Flame." O'Rourke started; a glint of understanding danced in his eager eyes. "I see you catch my meaning. What I have to propose is this: you will take pen and paper and write the name of the person who offers the reward, with his address. This you will enclose in an envelope, seal, and place in your pocket. The Pool of Flame—you see I trust you—is here."

O'Rourke got upon his feet with an exclamation; the vicomte was playing a bold hand. Before the Irishman had grasped his intention he had thrown upon the table a ruby as large, or larger, than an egg; an exquisite jewel, superbly cut and polished. Like a blood-red pool of living flame indeed it lay

between them, palpitating with strange and sinister fire upon the polished mahogany, flanked by the pale lustre of cut-glass decanters and tumblers.

Fascinated, O'Rourke remembered himself and sat down. Momentarily temptation had been strong upon him to make an end of the vicomte and have done with him altogether; yet, thief though he held the man, his concept of honour restrained him.

"You see." The vicomte's cold incisive tones cut the silence. Slowly he extended a hand and took up the great ruby, replacing it in his pocket.

"There is," he said evenly, "a level stretch of grass beyond the verandah. The night, I admit, is dark, but the light from these long windows should be sufficient for us. If you slay me, take the ruby and go in peace: this sot"—with a contemptuous glance at the unconscious honourable—"will never hinder you. If you die, I take the note from your pocket. The issue is fair. Will you fight, Irishman?"

O'Rourke's fist crashed upon the table as he rose. "Fight!" he cried. "Faith, I did not think ye had this in ye. Pistols, shall it be?"

"Thank you," said the vicomte, with a courtly bow, "but I am an indifferent shot. Had you chosen rapiers at Monte Carlo one of us would never have left the field alive."

He went to a side table, returning with a sheet of paper, an envelope, pen and ink. And when O'Rourke

had slipped the paper into his pocket he saw the vicomte waiting for him by one of the windows, two naked rapiers, slender and gleaming and long, beneath his arm. As the Irishman came up, with a bow, the Frenchman presented the hilts of both weapons for his choice.

Together and in silence they left the dining-room, strode across the verandah and down, a short step, to the lawn. The vicomte stood aside quickly, bringing his feet together and saluting in the full glare of light.

O'Rourke whipped hilt to chin with consummate grace, his heart singing. Work such as this he loved. The night was pitchy black, the windows barred it with radiance. In the dark spaces between a man might easily blunder and run upon his death. . . . Somewhere in the shadowy shrubbery a nightbird was singing as though its heart would break. There was a sweet smell in the air.

His blade touched the vicomte's with a shivering crash, musical as glass.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EARLY in the dull hot dawn a clatter of winches and a bustle of shadowy figures on the deck of a small trading vessel, which had spent the night between the moles of the harbour of Algiers, announced that the anchor was being weighed. Later, canvas was shaken out to catch the first faint breath of the morning breeze.

While this was taking place a small harbour boat, manned by two native watermen and carrying a single passenger, put out from the steamship quay, the oarsmen rowing with a will that hinted at a premium having been placed upon their speed. The coaster was barely under way, moving slowly in the water, when the boat ran alongside. A line was thrown from the ship and caught by one of the watermen, the boat hauled close in, and its passenger taken on deck.

He approached the captain with a confident and business-like air. The negotiations were brief and decisive. No questions were asked by the captain, no explanation offered by the would-be passenger. A price was named and agreed to, the destination fixed,

the passenger's luggage taken aboard, the small boat cast off.

An hour later, a pipe between his teeth, O'Rourke stood by the helmsman, staring back over the heaving expanse, swiftly widening, that lay between the coaster and the Algerian littoral. The world behind was grey and wan, but the skies ahead were golden. "A fair omen!" breathed the adventurer hopefully.

The bulk of the great ruby in his pocket brought his thoughts back in a wide swing to the girl who would be waiting for him at Rangoon. "Faith, and I must be getting below and making a dab at writing a letter to her. . . . *That* was nothing."

He nodded with meaning towards the bold profile of Algiers; the town tumbled down the hillside to the sea like an avalanche of broken snow, relieved here and there by the swelling, bubble-like dome of a mosque, rose pink in the morning glow.

Then, suddenly, a window, far up on the heights of St. Eugène, caught the first far-flung ray of the rising sun and glowed with a sullen, sanguinary crimson like . . .

With a sobered visage O'Rourke turned his back and looked ahead, into the promise of the brooding East.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An ill wind it was that blew Colonel O'Rourke into Athens. . . . It has blown itself out and been forgotten this many a day, praises be! but that, once it had whisked him thither, immediately it subsided and stubbornly it refused to lift again and waft him forth upon his wanderings, in the course of time came to be a matter of grievous concern to the Irishman.

All of which is equivalent to saying that the dropping breeze of his finances died altogether upon his arrival in the capital of Greece. Travelling by little-known routes and turning and twisting and doubling upon one's trail in order to throw off pursuit, is a business more or less expensive—and generally more. O'Rourke had found it so, at least. He who had started forth upon his quest with little enough, in all conscience, trusting to favourable chance to replenish his purse when the need arose, found now tardily that his trust had been misplaced. He disembarked from a coasting steamer in the harbour of the Piræus encumbered with a hundred francs or so, an invincible optimism, a trunk and a

kit-box, and a king's ransom on his person in the shape of the Pool of Flame; which latter was hardly to be esteemed a negotiable asset. Thereafter followed days of inaction, while his money ebbed, his hopes diminished; and he began to recognise the great truth that underlies one of the most admirable parodies, that:

> "There is a tide in the affairs of men,
> Which, taken any way you please, is bad,
> And strands them in forsaken guts and creeks
> No decent soul would think of visiting. . . ."

Thus Kipling; to whom O'Rourke, musing upon these lines one vacant hour, gave credit for a most penetrating comprehension in the matter of man's misfortunes. He felt that the verse might have been penned especially to fit his case—felt himself a bit of driftwood, flotsam idle in a backwater of ill fortunes.

'Twas indeed the divvle's own luck, to his way of thinking, and a most misfortunate matter entirely. He who was not the most patient soul in the world, resented it enormously; and, brooding over this sad outcome of mischance, fell into a temper sullen and black—a humour rare enough with the man to be notable.

Nearly two months had elapsed since he had promised two people—himself and one infinitely more dear to him—to be in Rangoon in ninety days. In

little more than a month she'd be waiting for him there. . . . And where would he be? Still was he far by many a long and weary mile from the first gateway to the East—Suez; and still he lacked many an aloof and distant dollar the funds to finance him thither.

If only he could contrive to get to Alexandria—! Danny was there—Danny Mahone, he of the red, red head and the ready fists; Danny, who held the O'Rourke as only second to the Pope in dignity and importance; who had been O'Rourke's valet in a happier time and of late in his humbler way an adventurer like his master. He was there, in Alexandria, half partner in a tobacco importing house, by virtue of money borrowed from O'Rourke long since, at a time when money was to be had of the man for the asking. . . . And Danny would help. . . .

You must see O'Rourke revolving in his mind this unhappy predicament of his, on the last of the many afternoons that he spent in Greece. Draw down the corners of his wide, mobile mouth, stir up the devils in his eyes until they flicker and flash their resentment, place a pucker between the brows of his habitually serene and unwrinkled forehead; and there you have him who sat beside the little table in the purple shadow of the Zappeion, with a head bared to the cool of the evening breeze, alternately puffing at a mediocre cigar and sipping black coffee from the demi-tasse at his elbow.

Now and again desisting from these diversions, the Irishman would sit for minutes at a time quite motionless, his gaze wandering longingly towards the empurpled reaches of the sea, glowing soft beyond the Attic plain, where Ægina dimly loomed, alluring the fancy, as if offering itself as the first stepping-stone from those hated shores to a fairer, stranger land. . . .

Now just as the sun was sinking behind the mountains and Hymettus was clothing its long slopes in vague violet light of mystery and enchantment (for this view alone O'Rourke took himself to the Zappeion daily) the Irishman's sombre meditations were interrupted.

"Phew! 'Otter'n the seven brass 'inges of 'ell!" remarked a cheerful voice, not two feet from his ear.

O'Rourke turned with an imperceptible start—he was not easily startled. "True for ye," he assented, taking stock of him who, with his weather-wise remark for an introduction, calmly possessed himself of the vacant chair at the other side of the table and grinned a rubicund grin across it.

He showed himself a man in stature no whit inferior to the Irishman, as to height; and perhaps he was a stone the heavier of the two. He lacked, otherwise, O'Rourke's alert habit, was of a slower, more stolid and beefy build. The eyes that met O'Rourke's were grey and bright and hard, and set

in a countenance flaming red—a colour partly natural and partly the result of his stroll through Athens' heated streets.

His dress was rough, and there was this and that about him to tell O'Rourke more plainly than words that his profession was something nautical; he was most probably a captain, from a certain air of determination and command that lurked beneath his free-and-easy manner.

Therefore, having summed the stranger up in a glance, "And when did ye get in, captain?" inquired O'Rourke.

The man jumped with surprise and shot a frightened—at least a questioning—glance at O'Rourke. Then, seeing that he was smiling in a friendly fashion, calmed and continued to cool his face and heat his blood by fanning himself vigorously with a straw hat.

"'Ow the dooce do you know I'm a captain?" he demanded, with a slightly aggrieved manner.

"It shouldn't take a man an hour to guess that, captain—any more than it would to pick ye out for an Englishman."

The captain stared, grey eyes widening. "An' perhaps you'll tell me my nyme next?" he suggested rather truculently.

"Divvle a bit. 'Tis no clairvoyant I am," laughed O'Rourke. "But I can tell ye me own. 'Tis O'Rourke, and 'tis delighted I am to meet a

white man in this heathen country. Sir, your hand!"

He put his own across the table and gripped the captain's heartily.

"Mine's 'Ole," the latter informed him.

"Ole?" queried O'Rourke. "Ole what?"

"Not Ole nothing," said the captain with some pardonable asperity. "I didn't s'y 'Ole, I s'yd 'Ole."

"Of course," O'Rourke assented gravely. "I'm stupid, Captain Hole, and a bit deaf in me off ear." This, however, was a polite lie.

"That explyns it," agreed the mollified man. "It's 'Ole, plyn Will'm 'Ole, master of the *Pelican*, fryghter, just in from Malta."

A light of interest kindled in O'Rourke's eyes. He reviewed the man with more respect, as due to one who might prove useful. "And bound——?" he insinuated craftily.

"Alexandria. . . . I just dropped in for a d'y or two to pick up a bit of cargo from a chap down at Piræus. It's dev'lish 'ot and I thought as 'ow I'd tyke a run up and see the city—'aving a bit of time free, y'know."

"Surely," sighed O'Rourke, a far-away look in his eyes. "For Alexandria, eh? Faith, I'd like to be sailing with ye."

Again the captain eyed O'Rourke askance. "Wot for?" he demanded directly. "The *Pelican's* a slow

old tramp. You can pick up a swifter passage on 'arf-a-dozen boats a day."

'"'Tis meself that knows that, sure," assented the Irishman. "'Tis but a trifling difficulty about ready money that detains me," he pursued boldly, with a confidential jerk of his head. "There's a bit of stuff—no matter what—that I don't want to pass through the Custom House at Alexandria. I'm not saying a word, captain, but if I could smuggle it into Egypt, the profit would be great enough to pay me passage-money a dozen times over. I'm saying this to ye in strict confidence, for, being an Englishman, ye won't let on."

"Never fear," Hole asserted stoutly. "*Umm.* . . . Er—I don't mind telling you, Mr. O'Rourke, I sometimes do a little in that line myself. Being a casual tramp and sometimes lyd by for weeks at a stretch for want of consignment——"

"Not another word, captain. I understand perfectly. Will ye be having a bit of a drink, now?"

Captain Hole would. "It won't 'urt to talk this over," he remarked. "Per'aps we might myke some sort of a dicker."

"Faith, 'tis meself that's agreeable," laughed the Irishman lightly.

And when, at midnight that night, he parted from a moist and sentimental sailor-man, whose capacity for liquor—even including the indescribable native

retsinato and masticha—had proved enormous, the arrangement had been arrived at, signed, sealed and delivered by a clasping of hands. And it was O'Rourke who was the happy man.

"'Tis Danny who'll be giving me the welcome," he assured himself, sitting on the edge of his bed and staring thoughtfully into the dishevelled depths of the battered steel kit-box that housed everything he owned in the world—for he was packing to join the *Pelican* at noon.

"I hope to hiven he has five pounds," announced O'Rourke later, frowning dubiously.

Five pounds happened to be the sum he had agreed to pay Captain Hole for the accommodation, it being further conditioned that the latter was to accompany the adventurer ashore at Alexandria and not part from him till the money was forthcoming: something which irked the Irishman's soul. "Why could he not take me word for it?" he demanded of midnight darkness tempered by feeble lamplight. "But, faith, I forget what I'm dealing with. Besides, 'tis sure I am to find Danny."

He arose and resumed his packing, blowing an inaudible little air through his puckered lips. "Divvilish awkward if I don't . . . By the Gods! I'd all but misremembered . . ."

He failed to state exactly what he had misremembered, but stood motionless, with troubled eyes star-

ing at the lamp flame, for a full five minutes. Then—

"I'll have to chance it," he said slowly. "'Tisn't as if it were mine."

He unbuttoned the front of his shirt and thrust a hand between his undershirt and his skin, fumbling about under his left armpit, his brows still gathered thoughtfully. Presently he gave a little jerk and removed his hand. It contained a chamois-skin bag about the size of a duck's egg, from which dangled the stout cord by which he had slung it about his neck.

Holding this gingerly, as if he feared it would explode, O'Rourke glanced at the window, drew the blind tight, and tiptoed to the door, where he turned the key in the lock. Then, returning to his bed and making sure that he was out of range of the keyhole, he cautiously loosened the drawstring at the mouth of the bag.

Something tumbled out into his palm and lay there like a ball of red-fire, brilliant and coruscant. The smoky rays of light from the lamp seemed to leap into the heart of the thing and set it all aquiver with dancing flame, deep and liquid. As the man's hand trembled slightly, shafts of incredibly brilliant light radiated from its lucent core and seemed to illuminate all the room with a lurid and unearthly glamour.

O'Rourke caught at his breath sharply; his very voice had an ominous ring in its timbre when he spoke at length.

"Blood," he said slowly, "blood. . . . I doubt not that rivers of blood have flowed for the sake of ye. Belike ye were fashioned of blood in the beginning, for 'tis that's your colour, and the story of ye as I've heard it is all told when I've said that one word—blood! . . .

"And 'tis meself that's to take ye to far Burmah, is it? 'Tis meself that's to make an everlasting fortune out of the return of ye to him who once owned ye, eh? I don't know why—'tis not like O'Rourke to be timorous—but I begin to believe that, fair as the future seems, I'll never do it. The odds are too great, I'm thinking, even for the O'Rourke."

He laughed shortly, and guardedly. "And the O'Rourke with this on his person will be pawning his guns and swords to-morrow for the wherewithal to settle his hotel bill!" And, after a bit, "I'd best put it away, I'm thinking. 'Twouldn't be safe to carry it that way any longer. If something should catch in me shirt on board, and rip it, and Hole happened to see it—why, me life wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase. I'll hide it in me box there; they'll niver suspect. . . . Why would a man with a jewel like this be reduced to begging a passage to Alexandria? Faith, I hope the captain

doesn't get too curious about what I want to smuggle into Egypt!"

And with that he thrust the Pool of Flame back into the leather bag, and the bag into the depths of the kit-box; which he presently locked and noiselessly moved beneath his bed. After all of which he lay down and with another sigh slept tranquilly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Some time in the golden afternoon of the following day, the *Pelican* weighed anchor and slouched with a loaferish air out of the harbour of the Piræus. A thick-set, stodgy boat she was, with a rakish list to port, a rusty freeboard from which the paint was peeling in strips, and a generally truculent, you-be-damned swagger (when the screw began to kick up a welter of foam under her stern) that reminded one for all the world of Captain Hole himself in his working clothes.

"Plyn Bill 'Ole," the latter said he preferred to be called. And "Plain Bill Hole!" mused the Irishman, leaning over the forward rail and sucking at a short black pipe. "Faith, not only plain, but even a trifle homely," he amended judgmatically. "You'd never be taking any prizes for personal pulchritude, captain dear—unless, to be sure, 'twas a bench show, where I'm thinking ye'd do fine!

"As for meself," he concluded later, "*I'm* no siren in *this* rig." And he lifted his eyebrows, protruding his lower lip, as he glanced down over his attire.

It was a strange rig for the O'Rourke to be in: an engineer's blue jumper, much the worse for wear, and a pair of trousers whose seat, O'Rourke maintained, was only held together by its coating of dirt and grease. The latter, moreover, had been built for a shorter man than the adventurer, and in consequence exposed at their lower extremities an immodest exhibit of Irish ankle—a disconcerting sight indeed to one of O'Rourke's native diffidence. His feet were thrust into heelless slippers also conspicuously lacking at the toes, his undershirt was of blue flannel whose primal hue was fast merging into spots of drab and black from exposure to weather and contact with grease; and the belt that held the whole together was nothing more nor less than a spare end of rope.

O'Rourke eyed this get-up with disdain. "Fortunately," he comforted himself, "'twon't be forever I'll be wearing it."

In the present instance, the disguise was held an advisable thing, since O'Rourke was officially registered on the ship's books as assistant engineer. The *Pelican* carried no license for passengers, and in view of his avowed purpose it was deemed unwise for the Irishman to risk detection by appearing "too tony" (an expression culled from the captain's vocabulary).

Otherwise, it was understood that his duties were to consist of the pursuit of his own sweet will, that he

was to occupy a stateroom aft, and that he was to mess at the captain's table.

With this arrangement he was content. Not for an instant would he have consented to herd with the crew, though Hole had tried to insist upon the advisability of such a course. But there are limits to all things, and O'Rourke drew a line at association with a nondescript company recruited from the slums of Genoa, Brindisi, Constantinople and Alexandria: Greek, Italians, a French thug or two and as many "Sou'wegians." The engineer was a Tyneside man who had lost his license in the wine-cup, and with the second officer, a lanky Scot, who chose to be called Dennison, rounded out a complement carefully to be avoided, either as a body or individually, especially on dark nights.

O'Rourke held himself aloof from them, with the exception of the three officers mentioned, not because he feared them in the least, but because he was not accustomed to mixing with such cattle. Consequently he had a rather lonely passage; for Hole was drunk every night and up to noon of every day in a villainous temper, quite naturally; Burch, the engineer, had his hands full making the engines hold together and hammer out their nine or ten knots; and Dennison was uncompanionable—a surly brute who loved trouble for its own dear sake and was never so happy as when (in his favourite phrase)

hammering the fear o' God into this or that hapless member of the crew.

So O'Rourke lounged about the deck, smoking his cutty and loafing with a right good will, communing with the stars, his memories and the blue, glimmering tide of the Ægean Sea.

The weather held bland and warm, each day coming up faultless out of an untroubled sea; and the *Pelican* seemed bound for anywhere at all save Alexandria. For the six days succeeding her departure from the Piræus, figuratively she hiked up her slatternly skirts, stuck her nose in the air, and lurched casually from isle to isle of the Grecian Archipelago, with no apparant purpose. Her course, picked out on the tattered and torn chart (years out of date) resembled as much as anything else a diagram of a sot's progress along a street plentifully studded with publics.

But if the reason for this leisurely sauntering hither and yon were puzzling to the uninitiated, it was occult to them only. If Captain Hole made no open reference to his business, he was careless about concealing it. The fact alone that the *Pelican* generally laid up for the night in some little-known island harbour was significant; as, for that matter, was the additional fact that the captain, accompanied by Dennison, invariably went ashore in a boat pulled by stupid Sou'wegians, to return to-

wards midnight laden with mysterious parcels, all of which were carted into the captain's stateroom and there secreted.

O'Rourke, who had been where he had been, who had seen what he had seen, and who knew what he knew, observed these matters with an indifferent eye; and if he took the trouble to put two and two together in his mind, he was at some pains to keep the sum total to himself.

At length, however, their island itinerary seemed to come to a natural close; the *Pelican's* nose was turned southeast and a course shaped direct for Alexandria.

On an evening, then, some nine or ten days after he had left Athens, O'Rourke at the forward rail saw the long, low profile of Egypt edge up out of the waters, saw it take colour and form, made out palms and the windmills, the light-house and Pompey's pillar; and knew that he was close upon his journey's end.

The news presumably was conveyed to Burch, and he, with the prospect of an orgy ashore that night in his mind's eye, accomplished the all-but-miraculous with the engines. The *Pelican* shuddered and stiffened up with a jerk; then, gathering her bedraggled skirts about her and picking up her heels, made all of eleven knots and possibly a shade more.

The sun was just setting as she swung impudently into the Western Harbour, with a gleam in her eye

and a leer for her more reputable sisters, steaming to an anchorage in the lee of the great breakwater, amongst a throng composed variously of Egyptian coasters, canal-boats, lateen-sailed feluccas, a P. & O. liner and one or two beetling men-o'-war, to say nothing of lesser fry of the Mediterranean trade.

Her winches rattled cheerfully as she dropped anchor, but O'Rourke did not move. There would be no going ashore, he knew, until Hole was ready, and that would be when the customs officials had paid him a call and the usual courtesies had been exchanged. The Irishman had no need to be in haste to change from his present garb to one that better suited him. So he lolled upon the rail and regarded with a kindling eye the harbour views.

To the east the Mohammedan quarter of the city, set upon the peninsula that separates the harbours, glowed in rainbow hues, lifted out of squalor and glorified by the setting sun. The light of Pharos hung a silver star against a sky draped in purple hangings. Westwards an angry sun was sinking in a welter of threatening clouds, painting the troubled waters a thousand shades of red and gold. Broad banners of scarlet and crimson and saffron flaunted from the horizon to a zenith rapidly darkening, shading from pure sapphire to a soft and warm bluish black in the east. And to the south again loomed the bulk of the city, huge and dark, humming with mystery and writhing in hopeless torment beneath the

lash of the khamsin, that hot and bitter wind that sweeps down to the coast from the seething deserts and, once started, gives no respite for forty days and nights.

But even the khamsin with its furnace breath had not power to make O'Rourke disapprove. It was all good, all desirable and inviting, in his eyes.

And he mopped his brow, simply (as befitted one of his apparent station in life) with the back of a hand, and stood erect, exulting in the scent, the indescribable, impalpable, insistent odour of the East that is forgotten of none who had ever known it. The hot wind drove it gustily in his face, and he sniffed and drew great lungfuls and was glad.

"'Tis good!" he said simply. And, a bit later, while on the short-line the brazen arcs were beginning to pop out silently: "There's the customs boat. I'm thinking I'll slip below."

As he turned and sauntered aft to the companionway, he exchanged a nod with Burch, who was mopping his brow in the entrance to the engine-room; and remarked that Captain Hole was with Dennison, at the side, awaiting the custom launch.

No lamps had yet been lighted below, but O'Rourke knew the way to his room. He entered and shut the door. The afterglow of the sunset, entering through the port-hole, rendered the little coop of a room light enough for his purpose. Dropping to

his knees, the Irishman pulled his kit-box from beneath the bunk.

The lid came up freely as he touched it. For a full minute he did not breathe. Then, in ominous silence, he bent and examined the lock. It became immediately evident that his memory had not tricked him; the trunk was locked, as he had left it that morning. But the clasp had yielded to a cold chisel.

It was hardly worth the trouble, still O'Rourke rummaged through the contents of the box, assuring himself that the chamois-bag was gone. So far as he could determine then, nothing else had been taken.

He shut down the lid and sat down to think it out, eyes hard, face grimly expressionless, only an intermittent nervous clenching and opening of his hands betraying his gathering rage and excitement. At length he arose, determination in his port.

One phrase alone escaped him: "And not a gun to me name!"

He went on deck. Already the tropic night had closed down upon the harbour, but it was easy enough to locate the captain and first officer, still waiting at the gangway. From overside arose the splutter of a launch—a raucous sound, yet one that barely rippled the surface of O'Rourke's consciousness. He stepped quickly to the captain's side and touched him gently on the arm.

"Captain," he said quickly, "I'll be asking the favour of a word with ye in private."

The captain swung around with an oath, whether of simulated or real surprise it would be hard to say; O'Rourke's approach had been noiseless because of his slippers, and it is barely possible that neither of the officers had remarked his descent to the saloon.

Hole caught the gleam of the Irishman's eye in the lamplight and—stepped back a pace.

"Get forrard," he said curtly. "Carn't you see the customs officer comin' aboard? I'll see you later."

"Ye will *not*. Ye'll hear me now, captain——"

Hole backed further away. "Wot!" he barked hoarsely, raising his voice. "Wot! I'll show you 'oo's master aboard this ship. Get forrard to your quarters! S'help-me-gawd!" he exploded violently. "'Oo ever 'eard the like of it?"

O'Rourke stepped nearer, his fists closing. "Drop that tone, ye scut!" he cried. "D'ye want me to spoil your little game?"

The shot went home. The captain gasped, and in the darkness O'Rourke fancied he lost a shade or two of his ruddy colour.

"Wotcher mean?" he demanded, lowering his tone.

"I mean," replied O'Rourke in a quick whisper, "that the Egyptian customs officer is at the side. Return what ye've stolen from me this day, or I'll

tell the whole harbour what ye've been up to! And, if ye want me to be more explicit, perhaps the word 'hashish' will refresh your memory!"

"I'll talk to you later——"

"Ye'll give me back me property this minute or——"

O'Rourke was at the rail in a stride. "Shall I tell him?" he demanded.

A swift step sounded beside him. He turned an instant too late, who had reckoned without Dennison. As he moved to protect himself the first officer's fist caught the Irishman just under the ear. And one hundred and seventy-five pounds of man and malice were behind it. O'Rourke shot into the scuppers as though kicked by a mule, struck his head against a piece of iron work and lay still, half stunned, shutting his teeth savagely upon a moan.

Hole and the first mate stood over him, and the captain's voice, guarded but clear enough, came to his ear:

"You'll lie there, me man, and not so much as whimper till I give you leave. Take 'eed wot I says. Mr. Dennison 'ere is goin' to clean 'is revolver."

O'Rourke lay silent, save for his quick breathing. The first officer, grinning malevolently, sat down near at hand, keeping a basilisk eye upon the prostrate man the while he fondled an able-bodied, hammerless Webley.

Hole moved off towards the gangway, whence his

voice arose, an instant later, greeting his visitor. The latter put a hurried question, which O'Rourke did not catch, but the captain's reply was quick enough:

"Only a mutinous dorg of a deck-'and. Wanted shore-leave and refused to go forrard when ordered. 'E ain't 'urted none. Mr. Dennison 'ere just gyve 'im a tap to keep him quiet."

The Irishman swore beneath his breath and watched the first officer. The light from the lantern at the gangway glanced dully upon the polished barrel of the revolver, and the gleaming line was steadily directed towards O'Rourke's head. Upon reconsideration he concluded to lie still, to wait and watch his opportunity; for the present, at least, he was indisposed to question Dennison's willingness to use the weapon. O'Rourke was to be kept quiet at all hazards, and he knew it full well; for once he conceded discretion the better part of valor, and was patient.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the face of the fact that the importation of hashish into Egypt has been declared illegal by Khedival legislation, the drug is always to be obtained in the lower dives of Alexandria, Cairo and Port Said—if one only knows where to go and how to ask for it. Manufactured in certain islands of the Grecian Archipelago, it is mysteriously exported under the very noses of complaisant authorities and, eluding the rigour of Egyptian customs, as well as the vigilance of Egyptian spies, finds its way to the fellaheen—among other avid consumers; speaking baldly, is smuggled into the land. All of which is, of course, very annoying to the authorities, besides being excessively sinful. The vitality of this lawless trade is really shocking, and very unpleasant penalties have been provided for those caught in the act of engaging in it. Customs inspections, furthermore, are as severe as might be expected by anyone acquainted with the country and its inhabitants—as was O'Rourke.

He felt, then, no sort of surprise at the brevity of the official visitation. The minutes might well have

seemed long to him who lay there, motionless, hardly daring to breathe, in momentary danger of assassination, and with a splitting headache into the bargain; but they dragged by no means as tediously as they might, for, heedless to his pain and a swelling the size of an egg which was becoming prominent just behind his ear, he was contemplating vengeance, actively formulating schemes involving reprisals. So it seemed to him that not ten minutes elapsed between the arrival of the customs inspector and the time of his departure over the side. Separating the two events there was a hurried visit to the saloon, where the lamps were lighted and from which the clinking of glasses could be heard, together with another clinking which O'Rourke shrewdly surmised to be caused by the contact of coined gold with coined gold. Emerging, the inspector, accompanied by an excessively urbane and suave Captain Hole, conscientiously but briefly glanced into the hold, asked a few questions which would have been pertinent had they not been entirely perfunctory, and took his leave.

From the gangway the captain turned back directly to his first officer and the latter's charge. Hearing his approaching footsteps, O'Rourke gathered himself together and summoned all his faculties to his aid.

"Troublesome?" demanded Hole, pausing.

"Not a syllable," said the mate. "Th' mon's

sensible. I ha'e me doubts but he's too canny altegither."

"Peaceful as a byby, eh? Well," savagely, "'e'll learn wot for. Get up, you Irish——"

O'Rourke lay passive under the storm of Hole's profanity. He had all but closed his eyes and was watching the pair from beneath his lashes.

Failing to elicit any response, "'Asn't 'e moved?" demanded the captain.

"Not a muscle——"

"Shammin'! 'Ere, I'll show 'im."

O'Rourke gritted his teeth and suppressed a groan as the toe of Hole's heavy boot crashed into his ribs. He fancied that a rib snapped; he knew better, but the pain was exquisite. But he made no sound. It was his only hope, to deceive and throw them off their guard by feigning unconsciousness.

"Th' mon's nae shamming," Dennison declared. "He's fair fainted."

"Fainted hell!" countered the captain rudely. "Give 'is arm a twist, Dennison."

The mate calmly disobeyed. The arm-twist desired by the captain requires the use of the twister's two hands, and stoutly as he defended his opinion, the first officer was by no means ready to put up his revolver.

He advanced and bent over the Irishman, who lay motionless, his upper lip rolled back to show his clenched teeth. "*Heugh!*" exclaimed the first offi-

cer, peering into his face, his tone expressive of the liveliest concern. Without further hesitation he dropped the revolver into his pocket and—received a tremendous short-arm blow in the face.

With a stifled cry he fell back, clutching at a broken nose, and sprawled at length; while O'Rourke, leaping to his feet, deliberately put a heel into the pit of Dennison's stomach, thereby effectually eliminating him as a factor in the further controversy. Simultaneously he advanced upon Captain Hole.

But in the latter he encountered no mean antagonist. The man—it has been said—was as tall and heavier than the adventurer, and by virtue of his position a competent and experienced rough-and-ready fighter. In a breath he had lowered his head and, bellowing like a bull, launched himself toward O'Rourke.

The Irishman met the onslaught with a stinging uppercut; which, nevertheless, failed to discourage the captain, who grappled and began to belabour O'Rourke with short, stabbing blows on the side of the head, at the same time endeavouring to trip him. The fury of his onset all but carried the Irishman off his feet. At the same time it defeated Hole's own purpose. O'Rourke watched his chance, seized the man's throat with both hands and, tightening his grip, fairly lifted him off his feet and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. Then, with a grunt of satis-

faction, he threw the captain from him and turned to face greater odds.

The noise of the conflict had brought the crew down upon the contestants. It is safe to say that they held neither of their officers in great love, but, on the other hand, ship-board discipline is a strangely potent thing. Unhappily the adventurer had neglected to shake the last flutter of breath out of Hole's carcass and even as the latter fell he barked an order to the crew. Inarticulate though it was, they interpreted it readily, and closed in upon the Irishman without delay. Surrounded, he was rushed to the rail. With that to his back he drew on his reserve of strength and, poising himself, began to give his assailants personal and individual attention. They pushed him close, snarling and cursing, hindering one another in their eagerness, and suffering variously for their temerity. O'Rourke fought with trained precision; his blows, lightning quick, were direct from the shoulder and very finely placed; and so straight did he strike that almost from the first his knuckles were torn and bleeding from their impact upon flesh and bone.

Fight as fiercely as he might, however, the pack was too heavy for him; and when presently he discerned, not in one but in half a dozen hands, gleams of light—the rays of a near-by lantern running down knife-blades—he conceded the moment imminent when he must sever his connection with the *Pelican*.

Moreover, he had a shrewd suspicion that Hole was up and only waiting for an opening to use his revolver.

It was hard to leave such a beautiful fight, and sorry was he to feel compelled to do so. But needs must when a Greek on one side, an Italian on the other, and a Cockney before you, drive at you with knives. Leaping to the rail, he poised an instant, then dived far out from the vessel's side, down into the Stygian blackness of the harbour water: a good clean dive, cutting the water with hardly a splash, he went down like an arrow, gradually swerving from the straight line of his flight into a long arc—so long, indeed, that he was well-nigh breathless when he came to the surface, a dozen yards or more from the *Pelican*.

Spitting out the foul harbour water, and with a swift glance over his shoulder that showed him the *Pelican's* dark freeboard like a wall, and a cluster of dark shapes hanging over the rail at the top vaguely revealed by lantern light, he struck out for the nearest vessel, employing the double overhand stroke, noisy but speedy.

That he heard no cry when he came to the surface, that Hole had not detected him by the phosphorescence, and that he had held his hand from firing, at first puzzled O'Rourke; but he reasoned that Hole probably feared to raise an alarm and thereby attract much undesirable attention to himself and his

ship. In the course of the first few strokes, however, he managed to peep again over his shoulder, and from the activity on the *Pelican's* decks concluded that he was to be pursued by boat; which, in fact, proved to be the case.

Fortunately the *Pelican* rode at anchor in waters studded thick with other vessels, affording plenty of hiding places on a night as black as that. The adventurer made direct for the first vessel, swam completely around it, and by the time the *Pelican's* boat was afloat and its rowers bending to the oars, he was supporting himself by a hand upon the unknown ship's cable, floating on his back with only his face out of water.

Under these conditions, it was small wonder that the boat missed him so completely. He saw it shoot by two cable-lengths' away, and disappear in the confusion of shipping, not to return.

At length rested, the Irishman released his hold and struck out for land at an easy pace. What little clothing he wore was no great weight upon him, and O'Rourke was a strong swimmer. But the lights seemed far, viewed from the very level of the water, and the hot khamsin threw little waves directly in the swimmer's face to blind and confuse him. Fearful of exhausting his powers by too frantic endeavour to reach the waterfront in the shortest possible space of time, he swam on at a leisurely rate, but steadily.

Presently he struck a little current that bore him gently inshore, measurably lightening his labours. The lights of anchored shipping together with those from the Marina (Alexandria's waterfront) streaked toward him across the waters like broken but radiant ribbons of many hues. Twice, wearied, O'Rourke paused to rest as before. But he had now little fear of being apprehended; Hole had all the wide waterfront to search and the chances that he and O'Rourke would select the same spot to land were a hundred to one against. For that matter, by this time the adventurer himself had entirely lost track of the *Pelican's* boat.

Eventually he gained the end of a quay, upon which he drew himself for a last rest and to let his dripping garments drain a bit ere venturing abroad in the streets.

Not until then, strangely enough, did it come to him with its full force, how he had been tricked and played upon from the very beginning. And he swore bitterly when he contemplated his present position of a penniless outcast in a city almost wholly strange to him, without friends (save indeed, Danny —wherever he might be), without a place to lay his head, lacking even a change of clothing. His kit-box was aboard the *Pelican* and likely to remain there, for all he could do to the contrary; in his present state, to apply to the authorities or to attempt to lodge a complaint against Captain Hole

would more likely than not result in incarceration on a charge of vagrancy more real than technical.

And—the Pool of Flame! He fumed with impotent rage when he saw how blindly he had stumbled into Hole's trap, how neatly he had permitted himself to be raped of the jewel. For in the light of late events he could not doubt but that Hole had sought him out armed with the knowledge that O'Rourke was in possession of the priceless jewel—more than probably advised and employed by Des Trebes: assuming that he had failed to inflict a mortal wound upon that adventurer.

"Aw, the divvle, the divvle!" complained O'Rourke. "Sure, and 'tis a pretty mess I've made of it all, now!"

Saying which he rose and clambered to the top of the quay—with the more haste than good will in view of the fact that to a splashing of oars, the dimly outlined shape of a boat heading directly for his refuge, had suddenly become visible. Of course, it might not be the boat from the *Pelican;* but O'Rourke was too thoroughly impressed with the conviction that the laws of coincidence were working against him, just then at any rate, to be willing to run unnecessary risks.

Chance, too, would have it that there should be an arc-light ablaze precisely at the foot of the pier, beneath which stood, clearly defined in the white glare, the figure of a hulking black native represent-

ative of the municipal police, whom O'Rourke must pass ere he could gain solid earth.

For this reason he dared not betray evidences of haste; his appearance was striking enough in all conscience, without any additional touches. So he thrust his hands into his pockets and sauntered with a well-assumed but perhaps not wholly convincing air of nonchalance towards the officer.

The latter remained all unsuspicious until—and then the mischief of it was that O'Rourke was still a full five yards the wrong side of the man—Hole himself leaped from the boat upon the end of the quay and sent a yell echoing after the fugitive.

"Hey!" he roared. "Stop 'im! Deserter! Thief! Stop thief!"

The black was facing O'Rourke in an instant, but simultaneously the Irishman was upon him and had put an elbow smartly into his midriff in passing, all but toppling the man backwards into the harbour.

It had been well for him had he succeeded. As it was the fellow saved himself by a hair's breadth and the next minute was after O'Rourke, yelling madly.

The Irishman showed a fleet pair of heels, be sure; but, undoubtedly, the devil himself was in the luck that night! Who shall describe in what manner a rabble springs out of the very cobbles of Alexandria's streets? Men, women, naked children and yapping pariah dogs, fellaheen, Arabs, Bedouins from the desert, Nubians, Greeks, Levantines—the

fugitive had not covered two-score yards ere a mob of such composition was snapping at his calves.

Turning and twisting, dodging and doubling, smiting this gratuitous enemy full in the face, treating the next as he had the limb of the law (and leaving both howling), he seized the first opening and swung into a narrow back-way, leading inland from the waterfront, black as an Egyptian night and full of unexpected pitfalls and obstacles in the shape of heaps of rubbish and filth in the roadway. And the man-pack streamed after him, crying the alarm ahead and complimenting their quarry in a dozen tongues and a hundred dialects.

He ran as seldom he had run before, straining and labouring, stumbling, recovering and plunging onward. And, by the gods, wasn't it hot! The khamsin raved and tore like a spirit of hell-fire through that narrow alley, turning it into a miniature inferno. With this improvement: that, whereas we are not advised that the nether pit is equipped with stenches, here there were smells more potent and evil than ever human nose had inhaled elsewhere—smells veritably fit to knock you down and stifle you to death: ancient and hoary smells which doubtless had a deal to do with driving the Chosen People to strike off the bonds of slavery and emigrate to the Land of Promise.

Through this unsavory and sweltering hole O'Rourke panted on, temples throbbing, the heart

hammering in his breast like a piece of clock-work gone mad, sweat pouring from him in showers—to such an alarming extent, he says, that he was persuaded that the ultimate outcome of it all would be a pool of moisture on the cobbles, the remains of him who had been Terence O'Rourke.

But, in the course of some minutes, the end of the tunnel came in view: a lighted rift between house walls, giving upon the illuminated street beyond. The sight brought forth a fresh burst of speed from O'Rourke. He dashed madly out of the alley, stumbled and ran headlong into a strolling Greek, who grappled with him, at first in surprise and then in resentment, while the clamour of the pursuing rabble shrilled loud and near and ever nearer.

Exhausted as he was, the Irishman struggled with little skill before he mastered his own surprise; and in the end saw his *finis* written along the blade of a thin, keen knife which the Greek had whipped from the folds of his garments and jerked threateningly above his head.

It was falling when O'Rourke saw it. In another breath he had been stabbed. Unexpectedly the Greek shrieked, dropped the knife as though it had turned suddenly white-hot in his hands, and leapt back from O'Rourke, nursing a broken wrist; while a voice as sweet as the singing of angels rang in the fugitive's ears, though the spirit of its melody was simple and crude enough.

"O'Rourke, be all th' powers! The masther himself! Glory, ye beggar, 'tis sorry I am that I didn't split the ugly face of ye wid me sthick! . . . This way, yer honour! Come wid me!"

Blindly enough (indeed the world was all awhirl about him) O'Rourke, his arm grasped by a strong and confident hand, permitted himself to be swung to the right and across the street. In a thought blackness again was all about him, but the hand gripped still his arm, hurrying him onwards; and he yielded blindly to its guidance—without power, for that matter, to question or to object; what breath he had he sorely needed. And as blindly he stumbled on for perhaps another hundred yards, while the voice of the rabble made hideous the night behind them. Hardly, indeed, had the two whipped into the mouth of the back-way ere it was choked by a swarm of pursuers. But—"Niver fear!" said the voice at his side. "'Tis ourselves that'll outwit them. . . . Here, now, yer honour, do ye go straight on widout sthoppin' ontil ye come to an iron dure in a dead wall at the end av this. Knock there wance, count tin, and knock again. I'll lead 'em away and be wid ye again in a brace av shakes!"

Benumbed by fatigue and exhaustion, O'Rourke obeyed. He was aware that his preserver with a wild whoop had darted aside into a cross-alley, but hardly aware of more. Mechanically he blundered

on until brought up by a wall that closed and made a *cul-de-sac* of the way.

With trembling hands he felt before him, fingers encountering the smooth, cool surface of a sheet of metal. This, then, was the door. As carefully as he could he knocked, counted ten, and knocked again —while the mob that had lusted for his blood trailed off down the side alley in frantic pursuit of his generous preserver. And he heard, with a smile, the latter's shrill defiant Irish yells luring them further upon the false scent.

"If 'tis not Danny," gasped the adventurer, "then myself's not the O'Rourke! Bless the lad!"

But as he breathed this benediction the iron door swung inwards and he stumbled across the threshold, half fainting, hardly conscious that he had done more than pass from open night to the night of an enclosed space. His foot caught on some obstruction and he went to his knees with a cry that was a cross between a sob and a groan; and incontinently fell full length upon an earthen floor, his head pillowed on his arm, panting as if his heart would break.

In the darkness above him someone cried aloud, a startled cry, and then the door was thrust to with a clang and rattle of bolts. A match rasped loudly and a flicker of light leaped from a small hand-lamp and revealed to its bearer the fagged and quivering figure on the floor.

Someone sat down beside him with a low exclamation of solicitude and gathered his head into her lap. Someone quite simply enfolded his neck with soft arms and pressed his head to her bosom, and as if that were not enough kissed him full and long upon his lips.

"My dear! My dear!" she murmured in French. "What has happened, O, what has happened? My poor, poor boy!"

Now the integral madness of all this was as effectual in restoring O'Rourke to partial consciousness as had been a douche of cold water in his face. Blankly he told himself that he was damned, and that it was all a dream. And yet, when he looked, it was to see, dim in the feeble glimmer of the lamp, the face of a woman as beautiful as young, as young as beautiful.

One glance was enough. O'Rourke shut his eyes again. "If I look too long," he assured himself, "she'll vanish or—or turn into a fiend. Sure, 'tis a judgment upon me! Too long have I been an amorous dram-drinker; this will undoubtedly be the delirium-tremens of love!"

And with that he passed quietly into temporary unconsciousness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He opened his eyes again, alone on the cool, damp, earthen floor, but assured that the feminine element in his adventure had been no hallucination, after all; for he could see the girl standing a little to one side and looking down upon him, her face so deep in shadow that he could gather nothing from its expression, whether it were of displeasure or of perplexity. From this and that, however, he deduced that she, discovering herself lavishing endearments on the wrong man, was not utterly delighted with the situation. The circumstances taken into consideration, such a state of mind he thought not unreasonable; and being now to some extent recovered, he saw no profit in making her suffer more. So with a show of faintness not wholly assumed, he rolled his head to one side, opened wide his eyes and looked the woman in the face, inquiring with his faint, thin brogue: "What's this, now, me dear?"

The girl's face darkened. She shook her head impatiently. "I have no English," she told him in excellent French. "Who are you? Why do you come here? You are not Danny!"

"Oho!" commented O'Rourke knowingly, "and that's the explanation, is it?" He sat up, embracing his knees and drawing a rueful face. "Faith, me dear," he admitted, "I concede ye the best of the argument, thus far. I am not Danny—'tis true as Gospel."

She frowned. "Then what are you doing here, monsieur? How did you learn—who told you—the signal?"

"Faith, from no less a person than Danny Mahone himself. He showed me the way and bade me knock—but niver a word said he of yourself, me dear." He smiled engagingly, then knitted his brows in thought, passing a hand across his eyes as if endeavouring to concentrate upon the vague and obscure. . . . "And then," he announced dreamily, "the door opened and—somehow—I fell into a pit of blackness, in which me own light went out like a tallow dip. . . . Tell me, if ye'll be so good, have I been here long?"

"Monsieur does not recall that I admitted him?" she persisted, but with a lightening face, "nor anything that happened thereafter?"

"Not the least in the world. What did happen, now?"

But she flanked that embarrassing question adroitly, evidently much relieved by O'Rourke's reassurance. Which was just what he wished her frame of mind to be. "Nothing that matters," she

replied, continuing to employ the French tongue, and that very prettily, with a fetching little accent. "I think you fainted. Then—but you know my Danny?"

"Your Danny!" said O'Rourke, his mood quizzical. "None better, me dear. I've known him since he was so high, or thereabouts." And he held a palm some six inches or so above the floor.

"And he—he brought you here?"

"Who else? How else would I be knowing the signal? Ye see, there was a bit of a shindig down the street and me in the middle thereof and getting all the worst of it—if ye must know—when along comes Danny and lends a hand and whips me off here and says he'll be back in a moment. He'll tell ye the details himself; but I"—he eyed her quizzically—"would now ask ye to overlook the unceremonious manner of me entrance and a certain lack of dignity as to me attire, which I beg ye to believe is not me ordinary evening dress, and—and faith! me throat is baked dry entirely, if me clothes are not. May I ask for a drink at mademoiselle's fair hands?"

He was on his feet now and enjoying the situation hugely. "And 'tis the Irish eye for beauty Danny has!" he told himself. "I commend his taste, the rogue!"

For the girl was exceedingly fair to see: slender and straight and girlish and sweet; a Greek, if he were to judge of her features and her dress, and in

that odd light, with perturbation in her pose, a smile half-perplexed trembling on her lips (because of O'Rourke's conceit) and the shadow of anxiety clouding her eyes, she made a charming picture indeed.

She was quick to grant his request. "Danny will explain," she agreed with conviction. "This way, then, if you please, monsieur, and"—as they passed through a low doorway—"if you will have the patience to wait here, I will fetch wine."

She smiled enchantingly, dropped him a bewitching little courtesy with a deference evoked, no doubt, by the man's subtle yet ineradicable air of distinction, and left him wholly captivated. "Bless her heart and pretty face!" he murmured, eyeing her retreating figure. "'Tis Danny who's the lucky dog . . . not that he's not deserving. . . ."

He reviewed his refuge summarily, discovering that he stood in one corner of a small courtyard, the centre of a hollow cube of masonry: a dwelling of two storeys, round whose upper floor ran an inner gallery to which steps led up from the court and from which access was to be had to the living rooms —all dark and silent Across the open space on the ground floor, two windows without glass were alight; but that was all, and their feeble glow served to illuminate the yard scarcely more than the softer, clearer light of the stars hanging low in the square of purple velvet sky above the flat roof.

In the centre of the courtyard a little fountain tinkled, a tiny jet of water rising from the central

upright of stone to spray the black, star-smitten pool beneath. There was a little plot of grass, likewise, with flowers generous of their cordial perfume. If overhead the withering khamsin raved, here at least was peace and quiet and an effect of serene things strong enough to make a weary, overwrought man rest himself upon a stone seat, clasp his head in his hands and question the events of the past few hours, whether they were not after all but nightmare, and this alone reality. . . .

But they were vivid enough in his memory; and O'Rourke was steadily and methodically, if in undertones, cursing Hole and Dennison, the *Pelican* and all her crew, when the girl came silently out from the shadows beneath the gallery, bringing him a cup and a jar of earthenware brimming with wine.

He accepted the service with a bow. "Mademoiselle is as kind as she is beautiful!" said he, and with the appreciation of a connoisseur first watched her blush, then drained the jug to its last drop and felt the grateful fluid grapple with his fatigue, temper it, and send new strength leaping through his veins. "And as good, I'm sure, as she is kind," he added; and "Ah!" he sighed, resuming his seat but rising again, and quickly, as a second summons clanged upon the iron door and sent the girl flying towards the rear of the house.

"That will be Danny, now," O'Rourke opined as she swept past him.

She murmured a response he did not clearly catch. "What's that?" he called after her.

"Or possibly," she repeated, pausing at the entrance to the rear chamber, "it may be Monsieur the Captain Hole!"

"The divvle!" cried O'Rourke, and was on his feet in a twinkling, casting about him for a weapon. "That can't be——"

Nothing offered itself suitable either for offence or defence, save and except the jug he had been drinking from, and the Irishman was weighing this thoughtfully with a definite intention of hurling it at Captain Hole's head, if indeed he had heard aright, when the entrance of quite another person relieved his mind, however temporarily.

It was Danny, plainly enough: Danny, the same as of old, with his half-sheepish, half-impudent grin and his shock of flaming hair, his upper lip that was long even for an Irish boy's, his roving and twinkling blue eyes, his tip-tilted nose, his short, sturdy physique.

"Faith," said O'Rourke, "the gods are not so unkind after all! 'Tis as welcome as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, the sight of ye, Danny!" And "Danny!" he observed with some severity, "I'll ask ye to explain what the divvle at all ye're doing here."

Danny's assurance deserted him on the instant. He had done his former master a signal service that

night, but in his estimation nothing more than was due the O'Rourke. Whatever he felt, he looked to perfection a boy caught at mischief—hanging his head and eyeing O'Rourke under his brows, shamefaced and ill at ease.

"Aw!" he deprecated, "sure, now, yer honour, now——"

"Danny," demanded O'Rourke sternly, "does Miss Cleopatra here understand English?"

"Divvle a word!" the ex-valet protested earnestly. "Beyond Greek and French and Arabic, sure, she's ignorant as Paddy's pig!"

So much was plainly evident from the girl's manner and expression of puzzlement. Reassured, O'Rourke proceeded:

"'Tis good hearing. Faith, if she understood the King's English, 'tis me hair she would be tearing out by the roots in one minute. Danny, I gather that the lady is be way of liking ye more than ye deserve. Is it in love with you she is?"

Danny stole a sidelong glance at the girl. "Beggin' yer honour's pardon," he stammered, "and I belave she is that."

"*Umm!*" snorted O'Rourke. "And what, if ye please, about poor Annie Bragin, at home? Is it marrying a Greek ye would be, and leaving poor Annie to cry her eyes out for ye, ye worthless scut?"

"Divvle a bit, respects to yer honour! Sure, 'tis only for amusement——"

"And who may she be, that ye make so free to amuse yourself with her?"

"The daughter av me partner, yer honour, Noccovie, the Greek tobaccy merchant."

"This will be his house, then?"

"No, sir, but a—a sort av a sthore-house, in a way av speaking. 'Tis jist 'round th' corner they do be livin' in a gran' foine house, sir."

"Then what's the young lady doing here?"

"Waitin' for me to take her place, sir. Noccovie is away and—and," in a blurted confession, "'tis a bit of hashish smuggling we do be doing on the side. The stuff is always brought here, sor; and to-night's the night a consignmint's due."

"Ah-h!" observed O'Rourke darkly. One by one, it seemed, he was gathering the trumps again into his own hand. He resumed his catechism of the boy.

"Danny, is this the way a decent man should be behaving himself?" he browbeat him. "Is it your mother's son and the sweetheart of Annie Bragin that's become no more than an idle breaker of hearts? Danny, Danny, what would Father Malachi be saying if he could hear what ye've just told me? Whin, boy, did ye confess last?"

Danny cowered. "Aw, dear!" he whimpered. "Aw, dearie-dear! And meself meant no harm at all!"

"Thin take your light-o'-love home, Danny, and

come back to me here at once with a change of clothes!"

"Yiss, yer honour. I'll do that, yer honour. But will ye hark for the signal at the door and let Cap'n Hole in?"

It was true, then!

"I will. But see that ye don't forget the change of clothes, Danny, and don't be lingering too long over your fond farewells with the lady, if ye're not looking for a hiding, and—Danny!"

"Yiss, sor?"

"Have ye a revolver?"

"Here, sor."

"Give it here, and bring another back with ye. Lively, now!"

Alone, O'Rourke seated himself on the edge of the fountain and considered gravely the uncertainties of life. "'Tis fate," he concluded soberly, at length. "And 'tis hard upon eleven now. They will not dare to run that cargo before midnight; and—meself sorely needs a bath."

Deliberately he stripped off rags and tatters and plunged into the fountain. Danny was back with the promised wearing apparel ere he had finished splashing.

And while O'Rourke dressed, and for long thereafter, the two sat and smoked and confabulated, talking of Men and Things and the turn of the Wheel of the World.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At midnight the muezzin in a neighbouring minaret turned his face to the windswept sky and summoned the faithful to prayer and meditation.

O'Rourke pulled thoughtfully at his pipe until the musical, melancholy wail had been whipped away by the breath of the khamsin, and there was silence save for the dull, heavy roaring overhead. Then he resumed the conversation where it had been interrupted.

"And ye say ye love the young woman, Danny?"

"I do that, yer honour."

"And ye would marry her?"

"Wid ye honour's consint—I'm ready, sor."

"But Danny—about Annie Bragin, now?"

Danny squirmed. "Sure, now, sor . . . Aw, yer honour . . . Now Annie—Annie's——"

"Take shame to yourself, Danny, for the gay deceiver that ye are."

"Aw, yer honour," clucked Danny helplessly; and "Aw . . ." said he again, crescendo.

"When did ye hear from home last, Danny?"

"Sure and that was long ago—a matter of years——"

"And no one's written to tell ye that Annie Bragin's married and a mother?"

"Aw!" cried Danny in a rage. "'Tis not so, is ut?"

"'Tis so—yes."

The boy worked the fingers of both hands together. "And hersilf that promised me not over tin years ago to wait until I made me forchune! . . . Aw . . . 'Tis like a woman."

"Can ye, Danny, pick a pin between the two of ye?"

Danny gaped. "Aw," said he; and was silent. Then, "'Tis different," he averred simply. "A man's a man, as I see ut, and if th' ladies fancy him, what is he to be doin', sor? Now take yersilf, sor——"

"On the contrary, we'll confine the argument to the case in hand," O'Rourke interrupted firmly. "'Tis different, entirely . . ." He veered upon a tangent hastily. "Ye thick-skulled imp!" he blustered, "be grateful to the woman that left ye free. How long is it since ye were telling me ye loved Mademoiselle Helen of Troy, here, with all your heart, such as it is, and all your soul, if ye have one, and all your body—what that's worth?—and wanted to marry her, Annie Bragin or no Annie Bragin?"

"Aw!" exclaimed Danny in rapture. "'Tis true, thin! There's nothing to stop me. Sure——"

"Have I given me consent, ye scut?"

"Aw, no," admitted the boy from an abyss of dejection. "But, yer honour——"

"Let be, Danny. I bless the banns. Ye may have her on one condition."

"Aw-w?"

"I've need of ye, as I've pointed out——"

"Sure, yer honour knows ye can count on me to the last breath in me, sor."

"Then ye'll come with me to Burmah?"

"Do you think, sor, I could slape of nights, after hearin' from yer own lips what ye've been through, and suspectin' what more ye must go through with before ye've won? Will I be comin', is ut? Faith, I'll go whether ye want me or not."

"And afterwards ye can come back to Miss Psyche here, or whatever her name may be."

"Yiss, yer honour, and thank ye kindly." . . . Abruptly Danny started up. "They'll be comin' now, sor," he said in an excited whisper. "I'm thinkin' I hear thim blundhering down the alley."

He turned toward the rear of the house, and as O'Rourke rose to follow him, the signal sounded on the metal door. Danny quickened his steps, and as he disappeared his master slipped quietly into the shadows beneath the overhanging gallery. From this point of seclusion he could hear distinctly the jar of the bolts as Danny opened the iron door, followed

by his hoarse whisper: "Whist! is ut yersilves, now?"

Hole's voice answered him huskily: "Who the hell else would it be? Let us in, you damn' harp."

The door creaked upon its hinges; and was cautiously closed. The bolts rattled again. Footsteps shuffled slowly, as of men heavily burdened, over the floor of earth. Then, while O'Rourke gathered himself together, exultation in his heart and the foretaste of revenge sweet in his mouth, two cloaked figures scuffled into the courtyard, breathing hard beneath their burdens of smuggled drug.

Hole promptly dumped his share of the load down upon the bench and swung upon Danny. "Where's Niccovie?" he demanded, evidently in as ugly a mood as he could muster. "Where is 'e? Stop standin' there and starin' with yer balmy trap open, yer——"

"That will be about enough," suggested O'Rourke pleasantly, in a conversational tone, stepping from his place of concealment. "Don't call names, Hole —ye're too near your God—if ye have one, which I misdoubt."

In the clear, bright starlight the pistols in his hands were plainly evident; and one stared the captain in the eye; one covered the head of the *Pelican's* first officer.

"Ye will not move!" said O'Rourke sharply, "save and except to put your hands above your

heads. So—don't delay, Mr. Dennison; I've never known me temper to be shorter."

Hole began to splutter excitedly. "Save your breath, ye whelp!" O'Rourke counselled him curtly. "Ye'll have need of it before I'm done with ye." He added: "Search and disarm them, Danny."

The servant set about his task with alacrity; it is safe to say that he left not so much as a match in the pocket of either. While he was about it, Hole, with his eyes steadily fixed upon the unwavering muzzles of O'Rourke's revolvers, managed to master his emotion enough to ask coherently:

"What are you goin' to do with us?"

"Ye'll see in good time," returned O'Rourke grimly. "Have ye found it, Danny?"

Danny backed away from Hole, whom he had searched after Dennison. "Yiss, sor," he returned. "At least, I think so. Is this ut?"

"I can't look at the moment, Danny. Is it a leather bag with something hard inside, the size of a hen's egg, or a bit larger?"

"The very same, yer honour."

"Very well," O'Rourke suppressed the tremble of relief in his voice. "Put it in your pocket, Danny—the very bottom of your pocket. Did ye find a gun on either of them?"

"One on each, sor."

"Loaded?"

"Yiss, sor."

"Then cover them, Danny."

For himself O'Rourke put down his pistols and calmly stripped off his coat, rolling up his sleeves.

"Hole," he said tersely, "don't move. If ye do, Danny will puncture ye. Your turn comes last. Dennison, ye may step out."

"What for?" demanded the Scot, advancing.

"To receive payment, with interest, for that blow ye gave me this evening, me man. Put up your hands. I'm going, in your own words, Mr. Dennison, to hammer the fear of God into as cowardly and despicable a pair of scoundrels as I've ever encountered. And," reflectively, "I've met a good many. But most of the others were Men."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Two battered and sore sailormen sat back to back, their arms lashed to one another and to the central upright so that neither could move, both half-submerged in the fountain of Niccovie the Greek.

"Ye'll find the bath quite refreshing," O'Rourke told them, preparing to depart, "as well as a novel experience. 'Twill do ye a world of good, Captain Hole, as anyone will tell ye who has ever had the misfortune to stand too leeward of ye. Your money and other belongings ye'll find on the bench here, if ever ye are loosed, which I doubt. I call your attention to the fact that I take nothing but me property, of which ye sought to rob me. On the other hand, because of that attempted robbery, I hereby refuse to pay my bill for passage from Athens to Alexandria. If ye care to dispute it, me solicitors in Dublin will be pleased to enter into litigation with ye. *Gentlemen!*" he bowed ironically, "I bid ye good night.

He was still chuckling over the outcome when, twenty minutes later, he and Danny were trudg-

ing through the silent streets of Alexandria, a full mile away, making for Danny's lodgings. One of the wanderer's lips was badly cut and swollen, and he was sore bruised from head to foot; but in his pocket rested the Pool of Flame, and about his mouth was wreathed a smile of ineffable complacency.

From time to time Danny turned to look up in his face with ever-growing wonder and admiration. But, sure, wasn't he the O'Rourke? And who iver heard av anny ma-an the equal of the O'Rourke? Danny wanted to know. He was a proud and happy Irishman, Danny; for he had found his master, and across his shoulders that master had flung a weary arm, partly for support, partly as a mark of his affectionate regard.

"But, Danny," O'Rourke pursued, with just a hint of anxiety in his tone, "would ye happen to be having a bit of lining in your pocket, now—be accident, as they say?"

Danny drew himself up proudly. "I'm eight-hoondred and fifty pounds, Ay-gyptian, sor, and two-hundred av that is yours be rights, bein' what ye lent me, yer honour, while all the rist is yours for the taking."

"That's fine, Danny, fine!" sighed O'Rourke. "'Tis yourself will never regret investing it in Pool of Flame, Unlimited. I'll personally guarantee the income from it, Danny."

"Shure, sor, don't *I* know?"

"And in the morning, early, Danny, ye and I will take boat and go out to the *Pelican* for me kit-box."

But in the morning, as it happened, the *Pelican* had discreetly left the harbour.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE sky was brazen, an inverted bowl; the sea, blue and oily, swelled and subsided in long, imperceptible undulations, reflecting a lane of garish brass; the desert was tarnished brass, a glaring greyish yellow, spotted with grey-greenlike verdegris. To the south the canal reached, a stretch of blue, still, motionless, like a streak of paint . . .

In the roadstead were vessels, some apparently idle and abandoned, lifeless, others again seeming to strain at the leash—hot vapour streaming from their funnels, their decks crowded, their air impatient. In the number of the latter the *Panjnab*, a steamer eastward-bound, swung at anchor near the entrance to the canal.

She was coaling. From the shore to her sides flat barges plied, black, clumsy, laden deep with black ore, glittering, dead. About her they clustered, a pack in leash. One after another they were swung in position and held so by straining cables, to be invaded by an ant-like swarm of men, women and children with baskets, themselves as black, well-nigh as naked, as the stuff they handled. Baskets of coal seemed to fly up the sides, into the ports, of

the *Panjnab*, as if incredibly in defiance of the laws of gravitation. A slight, distinctly perceptible haze of black dust enveloped the ship like mist. A low moaning hung in the air like an essence, intangible, impalpable, inevitable: the plaintive sing-song of the coal-heavers rising and falling in mournful monotony, endlessly iterated.

It was mid-afternoon of a sultry day. No air stirred. The *Panjnab* was coaling at Port Said.

O'Rourke eyed the vessel with disfavour from the shore; then dropped into a harbour dinghy, ensconced himself at the tiller-ropes, and caused himself, with his luggage and his man-servant, to be conveyed alongside the steamer.

Near the gangway he was held back; another boat had forestalled him, another intending passenger was shipping for the East. O'Rourke was interested idly.

He saw a woman, a slight, trim figure becomingly attired in white, with a veil about her head, leave the boat and mount the gangway steps with a springy, youthful step, a cheerful and positive air, a certain but indefinable calm of self-possession. At the top she paused, turned, looked down, watching the transfer of her luggage and her maid. . . . From sundry intangible indications O'Rourke assumed the second woman's figure to be the lady's maid. And so did Danny. The one eyed the mistress, the other her servant, both with interest. . . .

The woman on deck threw back her veil She seemed to promise uncommon beauty of the English type, full-coloured and of classic mould. . . . The Irishman was much too far away to be certain, but he fancied that her gaze wandered toward him and—but this, of course, was only imagination—that she started slightly.

At all events, she was quick to drop the veil and turn away. Her maid joining her, both vanished beneath the canvas awnings. The boat that had brought her sheered off, and O'Rourke was permitted to board the *Panjnab*. Danny, fussing importantly over the luggage, followed him.

It was a glad day, the O'Rourke told himself, that he trod those decks; it saw him definitely started on his way to the East, the splendid, barbaric and alluring East that called ever, insistently, with a siren voice, the East where his fortune lay—at the rainbow's end. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY

O'Rourke roused upon his elbow and peered out of the port of his stateroom. The steamer was ploughing through the Bitter Lakes. He saw a string of buoys, a width of water like a jade, a vista of sand, flat, grey, patched with grey-green desert shrub, bounded only by the horizon. . . .

"Damn . . ." said he listlessly. He slipped down again upon his back, panted, and wiped his brow.

Danny, recognising that he was not expected to respond, and being a young man remarkably acute to diagnose his master's moods, prudently refrained from comment. He sat hunched up on a cabin stool, his intensely red, bullet-shaped head bent low over a bit of chamois skin, which he was sewing into a rough, sturdy bag. From time to time he rested it on his knees, while he waxed his thread or deftly found the eye of the needle as gracefully and airily as any needlewoman living.

O'Rourke lay back on his pillows, methodically mopping perspiration from his forehead, his knees crossed in the air. Attired quite simply and

unaffectedly in pajamas of sheer India silk, in all likelihood he had got himself as near to comfort as any other passenger aboard the *Panjnab;* but this was not at all borne out by his expression, which was frankly a scowl of discontent.

He had excuse; the heat of the canal was most properly to be characterised unbearable. The little stateroom was stuffy and close; no least sigh of air stirred in through the open port; and only a whining punka swaying tediously overhead served to make existence tolerable.

Yet it was not altogether the heat that disturbed O'Rourke and rendered him moody and dissatisfied. He was a seasoned traveller, and could stand much in the way of high temperature. It was the simple fact that he felt it unwise to go on deck ere the sun should set or Suez be left behind, that irritated him. In other circumstances he had been quite content to abide where he was; but he resented it enormously that anything should be denied him, and so swore intermittently beneath his breath: big, black, able-bodied, blood-curdling oaths that had done service in a dozen climes and were of proven worth.

Danny worked on, imperturbable; only at times would his faintly marked, reddish eyebrows elevate and a twinkle lighten his eyes when a particularly virulent oath minded him of some amusing incident in the past association of himself with his

master. Little worried Danny; in his philosophy the past was past, the future on the knees of the gods, and the present in the hands of O'Rourke, whom he worshipped. A simple creed and comforting, all-sufficient for Danny.

But O'Rourke fumed. He smoked, and found it overheating. He tried to pin his attention to a yellow-backed French novel which at any other time he would have thought amusing, and failed. He squirmed restlessly, but discovered no cool spot in his berth. The devil was in it! . . .

As the sun dipped beneath the rim of the horizon, a pleasant shadow invaded the stateroom, until that moment blood-red with its level rays. And Danny straightened up, dropping thimble and thread, announcing the completion of his needlework by a brief, contented: "There!"

O'Rourke glanced at the article dangling from his valet's fingers, and slammed the book against the bulkhead at the foot of his berth.

"Finished, is it?" he exclaimed. "Faith, 'tis about time, ye lazy good-for-naught!"

Danny smiled serenely. "And a good job, too, sor," said he proudly. "M'anin' no onrespect to yer honour," he added hastily.

O'Rourke grunted acceptance of the implied apology, and sat up. "Let me see it," he demanded. "Sure, if there's a weak stitch in it, Danny, I promise I'll boot ye over the side."

"Nivver fear, yer honour. 'Tis a foine, strong job."

O'Rourke took the subject of discussion in his fingers and examined it searchingly.

"'Twill do," he announced. "'Twill serve its purpose, if no more. 'Tis a great comfort to me, Danny, to know that, if all else fails ye, ye can earn a comfortable living doing plain sewing. Lay out me evening clothes now." He stood up, stopping to stare through the port. "Good enough," he commented on what he discovered without; "'tis passing Suez we are this blessed minute. Praises be, we caught a boat that doesn't stop here."

Danny scratched an ankle thoughtfully. "Yiss, yer honour," he assented, dubious. "But, for all that, phwat's to hinder annywan from boordin' us be boat, if they sh'u'd want to?"

O'Rourke turned and eyed the man keenly. "'Tis a great head ye have on your shoulders, Danny," he said. "Sometimes ye betray almost canine intilligence. I'm be way of having hopes of ye. Now get ye on deck and watch to see who does come aboard, if anyone, and report to me."

"Yiss, yer honour."

O'Rourke bolted the door after Danny and assured himself that the keyhole was properly wadded, that no crack existed through which his movements might be observed from the gangway. Shrugging

his broad shoulders he returned to the seat vacated by his valet and thrust a hand beneath the coat of his pajamas, withdrawing it a moment later, fingers tightly wrapped about a rather bulky object.

And the Pool of Flame lay glittering and stabbing his eyes with shafts of blood-red light.

Into its depths of pellucid fire O'Rourke gazed long and earnestly, in the most profound meditation. For minutes he did not move, save to shift the gigantic stone from side to side, watching it catch and glorify the fading light of day. The most sombre of thoughts seemed to fill his mind; his straightforward and dauntless eye became clouded, his unlined brow was shadowed with apprehension.

But at length, slipping the ruby into the new receptacle and drawing the lanyard tight about its puckered throat, he stood up and threw the loop over his head, permitting the bag with its precious contents to fall beneath the folds of his jacket; and, shaking off the sober mood inspired in him by the study of the stone, rang for a steward, to whom, when he responded, he entrusted a summons for Danny—"if so be it we're clear of Suez."

In the course of five minutes or so Danny himself tapped on the door and presented to his master a beaming face.

"Divvle a sowl!" he announced triumphantly. "Sure, 'tis ourselves have given thim the slip entirely!"

He fished a brand new kit-box from beneath the berth and, opening it, began to lay out O'Rourke's clothing.

His master indulged in a sigh of relief. "Then no boat put off to us at all?" he questioned indifferently.

"Only wan," replied the servant, "and thot wid no wan in ut but a naygur."

"A negro?" demanded O'Rourke, facing about. "What do ye mean? Did he come aboard?"

"Sure and he did that, yer honour, and caught us be no moore thin the skin av his tathe and——"

O'Rourke bent over the man and seizing him by the shoulders swing him around so that their eyes met. "What the divvle!" demanded the adventurer, "did ye mean by telling me nobody boarded us, then? What——"

"Sure, yer honour. . . . Aw, yer honour! . . . 'Tis mesilf meant no harrm at all, at all!" protested Danny. "Didn't I say thot divvle a sowl came aboord? Sure, thin, is a naygur a human?"

With an exasperated gesture O'Rourke released the boy. "'Tis too much for me ye are," he said helplessly. "Now and again I believe ye have the makings of a man in ye, and then ye go off and play the fool! If I didn't believe ye a pure simpleton with not an ounce of mischief in your body, I'd take that out of your worthless hide. Get on with

ye! Tell me about this 'naygur.' What sort of a black man is he?"

"Sure, sor," whimpered Danny, "'tis mesilf that w'u'd die rather thin have ye talk to me thot way, yer honour. Upon me sowl, I niver thought ye'd worry about a poor divvle av a naygur, come aboard wid nothin' but a say-chist and the clothes he walks in, beggin' for a chanst to worrk his passage to Bombay, sor."

"Did they let him sign on, then?" inquired O'Rourke.

"Divvle a bit, rayspicts to ye." More cheerfully Danny struggled with the studs in O'Rourke's shirt. "The purser was all for kicking him back into his boat, sor, whin he offered to pay passage in the steerage. So they let him stay, sor."

"Seemed to have money—eh?"

"Aw, no, yer honour. 'Twas barely able he was to scrape ut all together."

"Lascar?"

"I belave so, yer honour. 'Tis harrd for me to say. Wan av thim naygur's as much like another as two pays, sor; 'tis all tarred wid the same brush they be."

"Ah, well!" The adventurer girded on his evening harness, satisfaction increasing and temper bettering as he regarded himself in the mirror and saw that his coat fitted him to perfection, that his trousers were impeccable in cut and material, his shirt

spotless, his tie knotted with just the right effect; that, altogether, he looked himself.

"Ah, well," he resumed more pacifically, "belike he's what he seems, Danny, and has no concern with us at all. Whether or no, care killed the cat. . . . D'ye mind, Danny," he swung off on one of his characteristically acute tangents, "the little woman with the red hair? Though 'tis meself should beg the lady's pardon for mentioning the colour of her hair in the same room with that outrageous headlight of yours, Danny. . . . D'ye mind her, I mean?"

"The wan ye observed at Poort Said, sor? The wan ye told me to discover the name av?"

"'Tis a brave detective ye would make, Danny. Ye have me meaning entirely!"

"Aw, yiss." Danny's lips tightened as he laced O'Rourke's patent-leather shoes. He cast up at his master's face an oblique glance of disapproval. "I mind the wan ye mane," he admitted.

He rose, and as he did so, O'Rourke gently but firmly twisted him around by the ear and as deliberately and thoughtfully kicked him.

"What the divvle is the matter with ye, Danny?" he inquired in pained remonstrance. "Is it mad ye are, or have ye no judgment at all, ye scut, that ye speak to me in that tone?"

Solicitously Danny rubbed the chastened portion of his person, grumbling but unrepentant. "'Tis

the wimmin," he complained, "'tis always the wimmin, beggin' yer honour's pardon. Sure and yer honour knows they do be forever gettin' us into trouble. 'Tis no more thin wance we get comfortable and aisy-loike in our minds, whin wan av thim pops up and drags ye off into some fracas or other——"

O'Rourke grinned tolerantly, retaining his hold upon the servitor's ear. "Her name?"

"Ow, yer honour, leggo! . . . . Missus Prynne, sor!"

The wanderer gave the ear another tweak, by way of enforcing the lesson. "Prynne, is it? And how did you learn that, Danny?"

"'Twas her maid told me, sor. Leggo, yer honour, plaze——"

"And how did her maid come to tell ye, ye great ugly, long-legged omadhaun?"

"Sure—ow!—'twas only a bit av a kiss I was by way av givin' her, sor——"

"That'll do, Danny," O'Rourke chuckled.

The peal of the trumpet announcing dinner interrupted his contemplated lecture on the ethics of investigation and the perils of flirtation as between maid- and man-servant. But as he turned away, smiling, Danny delayed him an instant to remove the last, least speck of dust from the lapel of his coat, ere he permitted the immaculate adventurer to depart.

"'Tis the bowld, dashing man he is," meditated Danny without malice, when the door had closed behind O'Rourke. "Phwat woman in all the world would be holdin' out ag'in' the loikes av him, now? Sure, befure the evenin's done, 'tis himself will be sittin' wid his arm crooked about the lady's waist, explainin' to her the moonlight on the wather!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

If Danny's notions of courtship as practised by those in stations of life above his own were slightly coloured by his own honest methods, his understanding of the cause of O'Rourke's interest in Mrs. Prynne was more at fault.

The wanderer had come upon that lady but once since he had boarded the *Panjnab*. That morning, himself early astir because of his vague misgivings, he had discovered her on the hurricane deck of the liner: an inconspicuous, slight figure in the shadow of a life-boat, leaning upon the rail and gazing with (he fancied) troubled eyes, out and across the waste below Ismalia. And, seeing her at such close quarters, in the clear light of the new day, he had been struck afresh with that impression her personality had conveyed to him, the evening before, of beauty and breeding beyond the ordinary.

Though she must have been conscious of nearing footsteps, she had not stirred, and he had passed on, gaining but a fugitive glimpse of a profile sweetly serious; nor had she appeared either at breakfast or luncheon. A circumstance which led him to surmise that she did not court observation:

an idiosyncrasy which seemed passing strange in a a woman so fair.

The memory of her, however, abode with him throughout the long, hot hours of the day; and, dwelling upon it, he—the imaginative Celt!—had invested her with an illusion of mystery wholly of his own manufacture. He told himself that she wore an air of watchfulness, of vague expectancy, as though she, like himself, feared some untoward mishap; that she had the manner of one definitely apprehensive, constantly on guard against some unforeseen peril.

Now, he asked himself, what could it be? What threatened her? And why?

Sure (and you can see the man straighten up and look round about, challenging the world) there was no good reason why any woman—more especially one so attractive—should fear aught when the O'Rourke was at hand to shield her for the asking. He dimly promised himself the pleasure of her acquaintance, relying in the rapid intimacy that springs up between strangers on a long voyage, with a still more indefinite intention of putting himself at her service in any cause that she might be pleased to name, provisionally: she must not interfere with his plans for reaching Rangoon "in ninety days."

That night he was hoping to find the lady at dinner; but though the ship's company was small,

he failed to see her in the saloon, at either the captain's, the chief officer's or the doctor's table; nor, so far as he could determine, was she taking the air on deck. Was it possible, then, that he had been right, that she had a reason equally as compelling as his own for secluding herself? Or, was it simply (and infinitely more probably) that Mrs. Prynne was indisposed, an enervated victim of excessive heat?

This latter conjecture proved apparently the right one, Mrs. Prynne failing to appear during the two following days, while the *Panjnab* was rocking down the Red Sea channel; and O'Rourke grew interested enough (he had little else to occupy his mind, for a duller voyage he had never known) to give Danny permission to pursue his inquiries: with an injunction, however, prohibiting too lavish an expenditure of the boy's wealth of affection. Whereupon Danny returned with the information that the mistress of Cecile, the maid, was suffering from heat exhaustion.

This was entirely reasonable. O'Rourke accepted the demolition of his airy castles of Romance, laughed at himself, in part was successful in putting the woman out of mind; doubtless, in time, he would have done so altogether, had not the lady chosen to take the air the night that the *Panjnab* negotiated the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. For on that same night, O'Rourke, himself wakeful, was minded

to sit up and watch the lights of Perim Island heave into view.

Circumstances were entirely favourable; the night had fallen passably cool and surpassingly beautiful, a strange, still night of stars, with a moon that rose before eleven, and waxing in strength, drenched the world with weird glamour. O'Rourke, in a deck-chair on the starboard side, well cloaked in the shadow of the deck above, watched the other passengers, one by one, quiet their chatter, yawn, stretch and slip below to stuffy staterooms. Save for the pulsing of the screws the ship was silent by eight bells; even the quaintly melancholy "*All's well!*" of the watch was distinctly audible in the stillness. Thenceforward for a space O'Rourke found himself in solitary possession of the deck, and was not ill pleased.

He suffered a dreamy eye to rove where it would, greedy of the night's superb illusion. Abeam, and far across the moonstruck waters, the precipitous coast of Arabia Deserta marched slowly, a low, black line athwart the horizon, gradually widening as the straits narrowed. The sea, where the moon's trail did not rest quivering, lay black as ink, as smooth and highly polished as a mahogany surface, almost as motionless. The prevailing winds of the season had subsided into still, stealthy airs, barely perceptible; stark night brooded on the face of the waters, profound in its mystery.

Awed by this unearthly wonder, O'Rourke was reluctant to stir; it were a profanation to smoke, even as the shudder and surge of the driven ship seemed a profanation. Unconscious of the lapse of time, indeed oblivious to it, the Irishman fell into a deep reverie, steeping his soul in sadness, pondering those futile days of adventure that lay behind him, seeking to penetrate the mystery of the future. . . .

Four bells—two o'clock—chimed upon his consciousness like a physical shock. He verified the hour by his watch and, reluctantly enough, agreed that it was time he got himself to bed. He half rose from his chair, then sank back with an inaudible catch of his breath. Without warning the apparition of a white-clad woman had invaded the promenade deck. For an instant he hardly credited his eyes, then, with a nod of recognition, he identified Mrs. Prynne.

Unquestionably unconscious of his presence in the shadow, she fell to pacing to and fro. Now and again she stopped, and with chin cradled in her small hands, elbows on the rail, watched the approaching cliffs of Arabia; then, with perhaps a sigh, returned to her untimely constitutional.

Partly because he had no wish to startle her, partly because he was glad to watch unobserved (he had a rare eye for beauty, the O'Rourke), the wanderer sat on without moving, stirred only by active curiosity. The strangeness of her appearance upon deck

at such an hour fascinated his imagination no less than her person held his eye. He gave himself over to vain and profitless speculation. . . . Why, he wondered, should she keep to her cabin the greater part of the evening, only to take the air when none might be supposed to observe her?

Why, if not to escape such observation? Then, he told himself, he must be right in his supposition that she had something to fear, someone to avoid. What or whom? What was it all, what the mystery that, as he watched her, seemed to grow, to cling about her like some formless, impalpable garment?

Events conspired to weave the man into the warp and woof of her affairs; more quickly than he could grasp the reason for his sudden action, he found himself a-foot and dashing aft at top speed. But an instant gone Mrs. Prynne had passed him, unmolested and wrapped in her splendid isolation; and then from the after part of the deck he had heard a slight and guarded cry of distress, and a small scuffling sound.

In two breaths he was by her side and found her struggling desperately in the arms of a lascar—a deck-hand on the steamer.

At first the strangeness of the business so amazed O'Rourke that he paused and held his hand, briefly rooted in action. For although it was apparent that she had been caught off her guard, wholly unpre-

pared against assault, and while she struggled fiercely to break the lascar's hold, the woman still uttered no cry. A single scream would have brought her aid; yet she held her tongue.

The two, the woman's slight, white figure and the lascar's gaunt and sinewy one, strained and fought, swaying silently in the shadows, tensely, with the effect of a fragment of some disordered nightmare. But then, as the lascar seemed about to overpower his victim, O'Rourke, electrified, sprang upon the man's back. With one strong arm deftly he embraced the fellow, an elbow beneath his chin forcing his head up and back. With the other hand O'Rourke none too gently tore away an arm encircling the woman. Then wrenching the two apart, he sent a knee crashing into the small of the lascar's back, all but breaking him in two, and so flung him sprawling into the scuppers.

Without a word the man slid upon his shoulders a full half-dozen feet, while O'Rourke had a momentary glimpse of his face in the moonlight—dark-skinned and sinister of expression with its white, glaring eyeballs. Then, in one bound, he was on his feet again and springing lithely back to the attack: and as he came on a jagged gleam of moonlight ran like lightning down the sinuous and formidable length of a kris, most deadly of knives.

O'Rourke fell back a pace or two. His own hands

were empty; he had nothing out naked fists and high courage to pit against the lascar and his kris. Keenly alert, he threw himself into a pose of defence. He had yet to give up a fight because the odds were long against him. He speculated briefly on the possibility of running in under the lascar's guard and closing with him, thereby escaping with perhaps a slight cut. . . .

But O'Rourke had forgotten the woman; it was enough that he had made possible her escape, and he had no thought other than she had fled. It was, therefore, with as much surprise as relief that he caught the glimmer of her white figure as she thrust herself before him and saw the lascar bring up in the middle of a leap, his nose not an inch from the muzzle of an army Webley of respect-compelling calibre.

Simultaneously, he heard her voice, clear and incisive if low of tone: "Drop that knife!"

The kris shivered upon the deck.

"Faith!" murmured the Irishman, "and what manner of woman is this, now?"

She did, indeed, command unstinted admiration. The weapon in her hands was firm and steady; and she handled herself as she did it—with supreme assurance.

The lascar stood as rigid as though carven out of stone, long, gaunt legs shining softly brown beneath his coal, dazzling white cummerbund, the upper half

of his body lost in the shadow of the deck, a grey blur standing for his turban.

O'Rourke stepped forward, with a quick movement kicking the kris overboard, and would have seized the fellow but that the woman intervened.

She said decisively: "If you please—no."

Bewildered, O'Rourke hesitated. "I beg your pardon——" he said in confusion.

She did not reply directly; her attention was all for the lascar, whom her revolver still covered. To him, "Go!" she said sharply, with a significant motion of the weapon.

The lascar stepped back, with a single wriggle losing himself in the dense shadows.

O'Rourke fairly gaped amazement at the woman, who, on her part, retreated slowly until her back touched the railing. She remained very quiet and thoroughly mistress of herself, betraying agitation only by slightly quickened breathing and cold pallor. Her eyes raked the deck on either hand: it was plain that she had no faith in the lascar, perhaps apprehended his return; yet her splendid control of her nerves evoked the Irishman's open admiration.

"Faith!" he cried, breaking a tense silence, "'tis yourself shames me, madam, with the courage of ye!"

She flashed him a glance, and laughed slightly. "Thank you," she returned. "I'm sure I don't know where I should be now but for you."

"'Twas nothing at all. But ye'll pardon me for suggesting that ye have made a mistake, madam."

"A mistake?" she echoed; and then, thoughtfully: "No, I shouldn't call it that."

"Letting him go, I mean. Neither of us, I believe, could well identify him. When ye report this outrage to the captain, whom will ye accuse?"

The woman stood away from the rail, replacing the revolver in a pocket hidden in the folds of her skirt. She laughed again, lightly—a deep-toned laugh that thrilled O'Rourke. She was indeed a woman among women, who could laugh after such an experience: a woman after his own heart.

"I shall accuse no one," she said quietly, "for I shan't report the affair."

"Ye will not——" he cried, astounded.

"Indeed, I am quite sincere: I shall do nothing whatever about it. It is, moreover, a favour which I shall ask of you, to say nothing of the matter to anyone."

O'Rourke hesitated, unwilling to believe that he had heard aright.

"Believe me," she was saying earnestly, "I have good reason for making a request so unaccountable to you."

"But—but—Mrs. Prynne——!"

"Oh, you know me then?" she interrupted sharply. And her look was curious and intent.

"I—'tis—faith!" O'Rourke stammered. He felt

his face burn. "Me valet told me," he confessed miserably. "'Tis a bit of a flirtation he's been having with your maid, Cecile, I believe, madam."

"Ah, yes." She seemed unaccountably relieved. "You, then, are Colonel O'Rourke?"

He bowed. "Terence O'Rourke, madam, and at your service, believe me."

"I am very glad," she said slowly, eyeing him deliberately, "that, since I had to be aided, it came through one of whom I have heard so much——"

"Faith, Mrs. Prynne——!"

"And I thank you a second time, very heartily!" She offered him her hand, and smiled bewitchingly.

"'Tis embarrassing me ye are," he protested. "Faith, to be thanked twice for so slight a service! I can only wish that I might do more——"

"It is possible," she said, apparently not in the least displeased by his presumption—— "It is possible that I may take you at your word, Colonel O'Rourke."

In her eyes, intent upon his, he fancied that he recognised an amused flicker, with, perhaps, a trace of deeper emotion: the kindling interest of a woman in a strong man, with whose signals he was not unfamiliar. Pride and his conceit stirred in his breast.

"'Twould be the delight of me life," he told her in an ecstasy.

"Don't be too sure, I warn you, colonel." Her

manner was now arch, her smile entirely charming. "It might be no light service I should require of you."

"Ye couldn't ask one too heavy. . . . But 'tis weary ye are, Mrs. Prynne?" he inquired, solicitous.

"Very." There was in fact an indefinite modulation of weariness in her voice. Her manner changed; she moved away, hesitated and returned, her dainty head drooping as with fatigue. She managed suddenly to make herself seem very fragile and pitiful; which is woman's most dangerous aspect in the eyes of man. "I'm only a woman," she said faintly, with a little gesture of deprecation; "and my ways are hedged about with grave perils——"

"'Tis the O'Rourke would gladly brave them all for ye, madam," he declared gallantly. "Command me—what ye will."

She lifted her gaze to his, colouring divinely there in the moon-glamour. He looked into her curiously bewitching eyes and saw there an appeal and a strange little tender smile. Her head was so near his shoulder that he was aware of the vague, alluring perfume of her hair. Her scarlet lips parted . . . And he became suddenly aware that it behooved him to hold himself well in hand. It were an easy matter to imagine himself swept off his feet, into a whirl of infatuation, with a little encouragement. And he was not unsophisticated enough to fail to see that

encouragement would not be lacking if he chose to recognise it.

"Faith," he told himself, "I'm thinking 'twould be wiser for me to take to me heels and run before . . ."

He was spared the ignominious necessity of flight. In two breaths they showed two very different pictures. Now they stood alone on the dead white deck, alone with the night, the sea, the stars, the silence and the moonlight: O'Rourke a bit dismayed and wary, but as curious as any man in such a case; the woman apparently yielding to a sudden fascination for him, swaying a little toward him as if inviting the refuge of his arms. . . . And now she started away, clutching at her heart, with a little choking cry of alarm; while beneath them the vessel was still quivering with a harsh yet deadened detonation like an explosion, together with a grinding crash and shriek of riven steel somewhere deep in the hold.

Inexpressibly dismayed, they stared with wide and questioning eyes at one another, through a long minute filled with an indescribable uproar: a succession of shocks and thumps in the interior of the vessel gradually diminishing in severity while, in a pandemonium of clamorous voices, the liner, like a stricken thing, hesitated in its southward surge, then slowly limped into a dead halt on the face of the waters. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

O'ROURKE's first fears were for the woman, his first words a lie designed to reassure her.

"What—what does it mean?" she gasped faintly, her face as white as marble, her eyes wide and terrified.

"Sure, I'm thinking 'tis nothing at all," he answered readily, with a smile amending, "nothing of any great consequence, that is to say. Permit me to escort ye to your cabin. But one moment."

He leaned far out over the rail, glancing down the vessel's freeboard fore and aft. To his eyes (and his eyes were sharpened, you may be sure) the *Panjnab* still rested on an even keel, nor seemed to be settling: a circumstance which tended to relieve his most immediate fear——that the vessel had struck one of those sharp-toothed coral reefs with which the Red Sea is so thickly studded.

"There'll be life-preservers in the lockers over there," said O'Rourke; "and if 'twill reassure ye I'll be happy to help ye adjust one. But I don't think it necessary. From this and that I judge 'tis no more than an engine-room accident."

"I'm not afraid," Mrs. Prynne interjected.

"Faith, I see that, madam. But your maid, now——? Would it not be well to return to your stateroom and quiet her, whilst I'm ascertaining the cause of this trouble? I promise to advise ye instantly, whether there's danger or not."

"You're very thoughtful," she returned. "I'm sure you're right. Thank you."

He escorted her to her stateroom and left her at the door, remarking its number and renewing his pledge to return in ten minutes—more speedily if possible. He was back in five, with a long face.

Mrs. Prynne answered instantly his double-knuckled summons and, stepping out quickly, closed the door tight. In the fraction of a second that it was wide, however, O'Rourke saw one side of the stateroom warm and bright with electric light, and sitting there, Cecile the maid, completely dressed, wide awake and vigilant. The girl was French and sullenly handsome after her kind. O'Rourke got an impression of a resolute chin and resolute eyes under level brows; and he did not in the least doubt that she was quite prepared to make good and effectual use of the revolver which she held pointed directly at the opening.

Why?

From her mistress's poise, too—one arm rigid at her side, the hand concealed in the folds of her gown—O'Rourke divined that she was alert, armed,

on her guard no less than the maid. But she left him no time to puzzle over the mystery.

"Well?" she demanded breathlessly.

"'Tis as I thought, Mrs. Prynne. A cylinder-head has blown off and done no end of damage. We're crippled, if in no danger. The other screw will take us as far as Aden, but there we'll have to wait for the next boat."

Mrs. Prynne's face clouded with dismay. "How long—a day or two?" she demanded.

"Mayhap," he replied, no less disconsolate; "mayhap as much as a week. Faith, 'tis meself that would it were otherwise, but I fear there's no mending matters."

She regarded him thoughtfully for an instant.

"Then you, too, travel in haste, colonel?"

"Indeed I do so, madam. Me fortune hangs upon me haste. If I get—there"—he checked himself in time, the word Rangoon upon his lips—"too late, 'twill be all up. I'm heavy with an urgent enterprise, madam." And he smiled.

The woman looked past him, down the dusk of the gangway, apparently pondering her dilemma. "What will you do?" she inquired at length.

"Faith!" he said, disturbed, "that's hard to say."

She flashed him an ironic look. "You mean you are resigned to the inevitable?"

"Be the powers!" he cried in resentment, "I'm

resigned to nothing that doesn't please me. Is it that ye ask me aid? Sure, if ye do, neither the inevitable nor the impossible shall keep ye from arriving at Bombay, and on time!"

Her spirit, through her eyes, answered his in a flash. Then cooling, she looked him over from crown to toe, weighing him deliberately in the balance of her knowledge of men. He bore the inspection with equanimity, quite sure of himslf, as was natural in the O'Rourke. Provoked, put on his mettle, he felt himself invincible, and showed it in every line of his pose. She could not have wavered long; indeed, her decision was quickly manifest. Impulsively she caught his two hands in her own.

"Yes," she cried, "I do believe in you! I take you at your word—your generous word, Colonel O'Rourke! I shall trust implicitly in you. You shall get me to Bombay by the fifteenth."

"The fifteenth?" he echoed thoughtfully. "This is the tenth."

"The *Panjnab* is scheduled to arrive on the fifteenth. All my plans depend upon there being no delay."

"Five days! . . . It shall be managed, Mrs. Prynne. Bombay by the fifteenth it shall be, or the O'Rourke will have broken his heart!"

She grew thoughtful. "You are very good—I've told you that. I believe that you will accomplish what you promise. Yet it seems hardly fair to sad-

dle you with my cares, my perils, without informing you of their nature——"

"Madam, 'tis not the O'Rourke who would ever be prying into your secrets. Let's not complicate a simple situation with explanations. 'Tis thus: ye have come to me and put yourself in me hands, saying——"

"Colonel, dear," she laughed, with a delicious imitation of his faint brogue, "will ye take me to Bombay by the fifteenth?"

"I will that," he asserted heartily: "I will if I have to swim the Arabian Sea with ye in me arms!"

To a tune of dull poundings in the engine-room, the *Panjnab* began to move onward, limping distressingly.

"Ye see," said O'Rourke, "the very stars work in their courses to aid us."

"I pin my faith to a less heavenly body—Colonel O'Rourke."

"Ye may, Mrs. Prynne," he returned simply. "And so 'tis good night to ye—or good morning! I'm off to scheme me a plan."

"But, colonel, there is one thing more." He paused. "It is a question," she continued, "of chartering a ship at Aden, is it not?"

"I see no other way."

"Then—spare no expense, Colonel O'Rourke. Remember that I foot the bill."

"But—er——"

"Or, if you insist, sir, I pay nothing: Great Britain pays for both of us."

"Eh? Yes?" he stammered.

"But see, colonel."

He had before then noted indifferently that she wore a chain of thin, fine gold about her neck, its termination—presumably a locket of some sort—hidden in the folds of her corsage. Now she quietly pulled this forth, and displayed her pendant, a little trinket of gold, a running greyhound exquisitely modelled.

Stunned, he stared first at the toy, then at the woman. "Ye mean to say——?" he whispered, doubting.

"On the King's service, Colonel O'Rourke!"

"A King's courier, madam? You—a woman!"

"And why not?" she demanded proudly. "The King's messengers dare many dangers, it's true. But in some of them might not a woman serve better than a man?"

"True enough. Yet 'tis unprecedented—at least, ye'll admit, most unusual. I begin to understand. That lascar, for instance——?"

"Believe me, Colonel O'Rourke, I'm at liberty to tell you nothing."

"Tell me this, at least: would ye know him if ye saw him again?"

"Truthfully," she said, looking him in the eye, "I would not. I will say one other word: I had

anticipated his attack, although I had never seen him before."

"Faith, 'tis yourself that has your courage with ye, Mrs. Prynne! . . . But good night, madam! Your servant!"

"Good night, colonel," she said softly, and as she watched him swing away, laughed lightly and strangely. Later, still standing outside her door, she sighed, and an odd light glowed deep in her eyes of greyish-green. Sighing again, and with another low laugh that rang a thought derisive, as though she were flouting the man whose service she accepted so gladly, she turned and vanished within her stateroom.

As she did so, the opposite door—that of an inside stateroom on the same gangway—was opened cautiously. A turbaned head peered out, its eyes glancing swiftly up and down the corridor. Long since, however, the excited passengers had been reassured and had returned to their berths; the coast was clear.

The lascar stepped noiselessly out, shut the door without a sound, and sped swiftly forward: a long, brown man with an impassive cast of countenance in which his eyes shone with a curious light.

As he swung into the space at the foot of the saloon companionway, he collided violently with an undersized and excessively red-headed Irishman, nearly upsetting the latter, to say nothing of a

glass of brandy-and-soda which he was conveying to a certain stateroom.

"Phwat the divvle, ye domned naygur! Pwhy d'ye not look where ye're going?" demanded Danny with some heat.

The East Indian backed away, bowed profoundly, mumbling something inarticulate, and sprang up the steps. Danny looked after him, for a moment hesitant, then put down the tray and pursued. He caught the flicker of the lascar's cummerbund as the latter escaped to the deck, and himself arrived at the forward end of the promenade just in time to see a white shape disappear into the steerage companionway.

"I'd take me oath," said Danny reflectively, "thot he's the naygur thot came aboard at Suez. 'Tis meself thot wishes I'd had a betther peep at the ugly mug av him. I'm thinking I'd betther be after tellin' himself."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LURCHING drunkenly into the harbour known locally as Aden Back Bay, the *Panjnab* came to anchor.

As it had been with Port Said, so it was with Aden: a dead calm held; the place basked unhappily in an intolerable blaze of sunlight. A theatrical sense of unreality, of illusion, was the keynote of the scene. Upon the painted water of the harbour that moved only in long, oily swells, mirroring the sun blindingly, painted vessels at their moorings jigged solemnly and silently with their inverted, painted images. Beyond them curved a crescent of glaring yellow beach, backed by the dingy settlement overshadowed by its three hotels; in the background the dead crater of Jebel Shan-shan reared a haggard crest into a sky of dense, painty blue. The air seethed with heat, causing the whole to vibrate, to tremble with all the instability of mirage, or like a stage backdrop swayed by an errant draught. . . .

O'Rourke, from the lower grating of the steamship's accommodation ladder, signalled to one of the swarm of hovering dinghys, and waiting for it to come in, reviewed the anchored shipping, gathered transiently together in that spot from the four corners of the earth, and shook his head despondingly.

A yellow-haired Somali boatman shot his little craft in to the grating. O'Rourke dropped upon the stern-seat and took the tiller. "Post Office pier," he said curtly. The dinghy shot away with dipping, dripping oars, while the Irishman continued to search among the vessels for anything that seemed to promise the speed necessary for his purpose, and failed to discover one.

"'Tis hopeless," he conceded bitterly as the boat wove a serpentine wake in and out among the heaving bulks. "And, I'm thinking, 'tis the O'Rourke who will presently be slinking back to confess he bragged beyond his powers. The fool that ye are, Terence, with your big words and your fine promises, all empty as your purse! 'Tis out of patience I am with ye entirely!" He gave it up, bowed to the fervour of the sun, pulled his helmet down over his eyes, and sat sunk deep in misery; for, sure, it was a sad, sad thing that the O'Rourke should have to confess defeat (and that at the very outset!) to a woman. . . .

Doubtless he made the very picture of unhappiness.

So, at least, seemed to think a man lounging in a dilapidated canvas deck-chair beneath a dirty awning in the stern of a distant tramp steamer; who, raking the shoreward-bound with a pair of rusty binoculars, had chanced to focus upon O'Rourke.

"Looks as if he hadn't a friend in the world,"

said the stout man audibly. "Looks as if a letter from home with a cash draft 'ud about fill *his* little bill."

He grunted in pleased appreciation of his own subtle wit. A short man he was, stout, very much at home in grimy pajamas and nothing else, with eyes small, blue, informed with twinkling humour and set in a florid countenance bristling with a three days' growth of greyish beard.

He swung the glasses again upon O'Rourke, and, "Hell!" he exclaimed, sitting up with stimulated interest. "Well, by jinks!" said the stout man. "Who'd a-thunk it?"

He got up with evident haste and waddled forward to the bridge, where he came upon what he evidently needed in his business: a huge and battered megaphone. Applying this to his lips and filling his lungs he bellowed with a right good will, and his hail, not unlike the roaring of an amiable bull, awoke Aden's echoes: "*O-o-Rourke!*"

"*Good* morning," murmured the Irishman, lifting his head to stare about him with incredulous curiosity. "Who's that barking at me?"

The pajama'd person continuing to shout at the top of his voice, by dint of earnest staring the Irishman eventually located the source of the uproar. "Now who the divvle might ye be?" he wondered. "Ananias, me friend,"—to the boatman—"row to the steamer yonder where the noise comes from."

Whereupon the stout man, seeing the boat alter its course, put aside the megaphone. And again peace brooded over Aden.

On nearer approach to the tramp, O'Rourke's smile broadened to a pleased grin, and airily he waved a hand to the man with the voice.

"Jimmy Quick!" he observed with unfeigned delight. "Faith, I begin to believe that me luck holds, after all!"

From the bottom step of the tramp's ladder he tossed a coin to the boatman, then mounted to the deck. Incontinently the stout man fell heavily upon his neck with symptoms of extreme joy. A lull succeeding his first transports, he wiped his eyes, beamed upon his guest and suggested insinuatingly: "Drink?"

"Brevity's ever the soul of your wit, captain," said O'Rourke. "I will." And he meekly followed Quick's bare heels forward to the officers' quarters beneath the bridge.

Having set him in a chair, Quick, still a-gurgle, wandered off, unearthed a bottle, beamed upon his visitor, asked a dozen questions in as many breaths and, without waiting for an answer, waddled off again to return with a brace of dripping soda-water bottles. "Schweppe's," he said, patting their rotund forms tenderly; "and the last in our lockers—all in your honour, colonel."

"So?" commented O'Rourke. "Hard up, is it?

'Tis not the O'Rourke who would be wishing ye ill, captain, dear, but, faith, meself's not sorry to hear that word this day. I'm thinking me luck is sound, after all."

Quick had again vanished. Presently O'Rourke heard his mighty voice booming down an engine-room ventilator. "Dravos! Dravos, you loafer! Come up and see a strange sight!"

He came back, still vibrant with an elephantine sort of joy. "O'Rourke," he panted, mopping a damp brow with the sleeve of his jacket, "you're a good sight for sore eyes. Never did we meet up with you yet but there came a run of luck."

"'Tis good hearing," said O'Rourke, smiling.

A slight little man slipped a bald head, relieved by ragged patches of grey hair about the temples, apologetically into the cabin door. He wore flapping Chinese slippers, a pair of trousers that seemed everlastingly on the point of slipping their moorings, and a thin cotton under-shirt, all saturated with oil and grease. His thin face, of a gentle, kindly cast, streaked with grime, continually he swabbed with a fistful of cotton waste and praiseworthy intent, accomplishing, however, nothing more than an artistic blending of smear and smudge, until his entire countenance was overcast with a gloomy shade, through which his faded smile shone like moonshine through a mist.

"The top of the day to ye, Dravos!" said

O'Rourke loudly, for little Dravos was partially deaf. "And how are the engines?"

The engineer carefully hitched up his trousers and regarded the wanderer with temperate geniality.

"Good afternoon, Colonel O'Rourke," he replied, clipping his words mincingly. "Very nicely, I thank you." He shook hands, sat down on the edge of a birth with the manner of one who fears he intrudes, and glanced searchingly at Quick. "If you're going to serve the drinks, cap'n," he snapped acidly, "*hump yourself!*"

The final words came with surprising heat and vigour. Quick, startled, discontinued lumbering round O'Rourke in what was apparently a mild delirium of bliss characterised by incoherent noises in the throat, and jumped to obey his engineer. Dravos regarded his huge bulk and deliberate movements with something of acerbity, his expression eloquent, saying distinctly: "I could do this thing better, more quickly, with less fuss."

He accepted his glass with a dispassionate air and drank hastily after a short nod to the guest, as one who sacrifices his personal inclinations to the laws of hospitality. But from his after-glow of benevolence, O'Rourke concluded that the drink had not been unwelcome.

"What brings you here?" demanded Quick in a subdued roar.

"I've a job for ye, if so be it ye're not otherwise engaged—and if ye can do it."

Quick slapped a huge thigh delightedly. "I knew it——could have sworn to it!"

"Can do anything," asserted Dravos with asperity.

"'Tis merely a question of speed," explained the Irishman. "Can ye make Bombay in four days—be the fifteenth?"

"Dravos," roared Quick, "how much speed can you get out of those damned engines?"

"Twenty knots," snapped Dravos indignantly.

"Ye're joking."

"Not in the least," returned the engineer with even more heat.

Quick slouched bulkily in his chair, eyeing the ceiling reminiscently.

"We made a bit of a strike last year," he volunteered. "No matter how nor why nor where. Dravos here sunk two-thirds of the money in new engines. They're beauties, all right," he conceded with a heavy sigh. "And we'll need them. We're going to take a little stroll down through the pearl fisheries pretty soon, and it takes good going to beat the patrol these days. The business ain't what it once was."

Dravos glared at him furiously, opened his mouth, changed his mind and shut his lips tightly. O'Rourke hastened to change the embarrassing subject.

"When can you sail?"

"To-night," said Dravos.

"If," stipulated Quick, "I can pick up a crew in Aden."

"'Tis settled then."

"We'll need a bit of money in advance."

"Ye shall have it, within reason."

Dravos rose and sidled towards the door, a far-away look in his pale eyes. "You strike the bargain, Quick," he said; "I'll have a look around the engine-room."

"Right-O, Bobby. . . . Yourself alone, I s'pose, O'Rourke?"

"And three others. Danny——"

"Yes, yes."

"And two ladies; an Englishwoman and her maid."

There fell a dead silence in the cabin. Dravos had halted on the threshold; he smiled sourly. Quick's eyes were bulging.

"A lady and her maid?" he gasped faintly.

"Might've known it," commented Dravos. "He's an Irishman." He sniffed and passed on.

O'Rourke laughed. Quick continued to eye him steadily, in unmitigated stupefaction. Presently, as one in a dream, he rinsed his mouth with dregs of soda-water and found voice enough to assert his conviction that he would be eternally damned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE day wore on, its calm unruffled, its heat unmitigated. Toward evening the unbearable brilliance of the sky became tarnished with clouds; night settled down, a pall of blackness penetrated only by the artificial glow ashore and the scattered, uneasy riding lights in the roadstead. A dull depression seemed to weigh upon the world; Dravos, coming to the engine-room hatchway for a breathing spell, sniffed the night air with a dubious, wrinkled nose, wagged his bald head and morosely prophesied the advent of the southwest monsoon.

By nine o'clock the *Ranee* lay with steam up, ready to weigh anchor. Miracles had been wrought within a few hours aboard that disreputable thousand-ton tramp. Her captain had been ashore, picked up a crew and laid in a week's supply of provisions, had interviewed the harbour authorities, secured his clearing papers and attended to a thousand minor details; to finance all of which O'Rourke advanced money from his private purse.

It is no praise to Dravos to state that his engines were in admirable condition. Such was their invari-

able state. For an assistant he impressed into service none other than Danny Mahone, to Danny's intense dismay. However, it was the O'Rourke's order, and whatsoever the O'Rourke desired, that Danny did with a show of cheerfulness, however distasteful he might find the work.

O'Rourke took upon himself the duties of first officer under Captain Quick. The Irishman cared little for the sea, knew less of a first officer's duties; but it was patent that Quick could not stand every watch, and O'Rourke was not to be daunted by any such slight matter as nautical inexperience.

Quarters had been provided for Mrs. Prynne and her maid, Quick not only surrendering his room, but working with a will to clear and cleanse it, in a sincere but almost hopeless attempt to make it fit for a woman's occupancy.

By nine all was ready; and at that hour, for the second time that day, O'Rourke ascended the accommodation ladder of the *Panjnab*. At the lower grating there awaited him one of the *Ranee's* boats, manned by a brace of lascars drawn from Quick's makeshift crew: a sullen pair of scoundrels, both warned to hold no converse with any of the *Panjnab's* men, under penalty, if discovered, of O'Rourke's extreme displeasure; which they were further given to understand was no light matter.

For O'Rourke was anything but easy in his mind; at intervals all through the day there had been re-

curring to him a sincere regret that Mrs. Prynne had interfered to prevent the summary punishment he would have dealt out to her assailant on the promenade deck.

"'Twas a mistake, to me own way of thinking," he pondered. "'Tis in that divvle her danger lies—whatever at all it may be, which I meself can't guess. Sure, the man had some motive for making that attack. 'Tisn't likely at all he will have forgot it. I'm persuaded 'tis as well that he and we are to continue the journey be different ships."

He kept an eye sharp for sight of the lascar aboard the *Panjnab*, but saw nothing of him. The crippled steamer was all but deserted, its quondam passengers having eagerly availed themselves of the opportunity for a run ashore and a sojourn at one of the beach hotels. So, meeting practically no one, and that much to his relief, O'Rourke found his way to Mrs. Prynne's stateroom. As on previous occasions, his guarded knock was answered immediately, and he observed the same extreme caution in the woman's wary manner as well as her maid's readiness.

"'Tis deep," he told himself: "a rare deep mystery. I'm thinking meself will never see the bottom of it. . . . Mrs. Prynne"—aloud—"is it ready ye are?"

The Englishwoman's expressive smile drew attention to her costume, and O'Rourke was forced to

acknowledge his question superfluous; Mrs. Prynne was prepared for anything.

She had donned a serviceable tweed tourist suit, short of skirt and cut with a certain simplicity that would have evoked the comment "sensible" had it been worn by another of her country-women. She, to the contrary, lent it an indefinable grace that robbed its uncompromising lines of their severity. From her helmet to her canvas puttees there was not a trace of the mannish; she showed herself entirely feminine, wholly charming and—more important still—dressed precisely as she should be to brave the hardships of a voyage on a tramp of the Eastern seas.

"Have you explained to Captain—Captain—?"

"Quick?"

"—Captain Quick, that his bill is to be presented to the Indian Government, by which it will be promptly paid, in cash?"

"I have that, madam; 'tis all settled, and the captain understands that he sails on His Majesty's business." He paused and threw back his head, smiling his triumph. "Did I not tell ye, madam? Did ye do ill to trust in the O'Rourke?"

"You shall learn of my gratitude, colonel."

"Not a word of that, if ye please! The boat's in waiting for ye, madam, and the *Ranee* is straining at her cable like your golden greyhound at his leash, impatient to be off."

Mrs. Prynne turned. "Cecile! . . . Now, colonel dear, I'm at your orders."

Three minutes later the *Panjnab* was minus four more passengers—Danny being already aboard the *Ranee*, hearking sulkily enough to a lecture on the rules of engine-room etiquette as propounded by a bald-headed wisp of oil-soaked humanity—"wid trousies," Danny complained, "thot forever made ye hopeful of bein' shocked."

The tramp was riding with anchor a-trip, and hardly had Mrs. Prynne set foot upon the deck ere the ship began to move. Within the hour Dravos' engines had settled into their stride, and the *Ranee*, with a bone between her teeth, was stretching down the Gulf of Aden, pointing her nose to the heart of the Arabian Sea.

In the knowledge that they were safely off at last there was poignant relief to the wanderer, as he stood by Quick's side, on the bridge, with midnight, imminent and the ship still and peaceful. He peered into the oppressive thickness ahead, saw nothing and was glad. The damp air puffing in his face was sharp with the tang of the open sea, sweet with an assurance of dangers passed. To that moment Mrs. Prynne's secret had weighed upon his imagination; now it was a matter of no immediate consequence. For the succeeding days there would be naught to do save to stand watch-and-watch with Quick and—mayhap, indulge in a bit of philandering, just by way of diversion.

The Irishman heaved a deep sigh of contentment: "Faith!"—briefly.

"Come again?" suggested Quick, turning from the wheel.

"I was merely expressing me pleasure in being out of that mess, captain dear," explained O'Rourke obscurely.

"What mess?"

O'Rourke glanced at the man at the wheel—a stalwart lascar, apparently a Malay, erect, self-contained, impassive, eyes on the binnacle, arms shining like polished bronze in the light of the lamp as point by point he shifted the spokes. He seemed utterly oblivious to all save his duty; nevertheless, a vague distrust of all men of his colour stirred in O'Rourke.

"A fine night," he observed obscurely, glancing at the sky: "be the smell of it, 'tis rain we'll be having the morning, Jimmy Quick."

The northern horizon glowed pale gold for a long minute; and then again the world was black. A salvo of shocks rattled through the night-wrapped void.

"Thunderstorms," commented Quick superfluously. "Showers before sun-up, then the monsoon. You didn't answer my question," he persisted querously. "I said, what mess?"

O'Rourke moved abstractedly to the far end of the bridge, keeping an eye on the man at the wheel.

"'Twas the divvle of a mess for the little woman,"

said O'Rourke. "I'll tell ye about it, me boy, but for the love of Hiven, captain, if ye have to make any comments, whisper 'em. Then not more than half the ship will hear."

He recounted briefly, in crisp phrases, Mrs. Prynne's adventure on the *Panjnab*. When he concluded Quick whistled softly.

"She let him go?" he iterated, with an obvious effort to gentle his voice. "What'n hell'd she do that for?"

"Mainly," O'Rourke speculated, "to avoid attracting attention to herself, I'm thinking. I've told ye what she is."

"King's courier? Something diplomatic, I suppose. Well, probably she knows her business; damned if I do."

"Never a truer word passed your lips, captain," laughed O'Rourke; "and as much can be said for meself."

"Oh, well!" said the captain, "she's got no cause to worry now. We'll pull her through on time or bust a gallus, O'Rourke."

He stepped to the rail and leaning over bawled: "Silence, there!" And for a time peace obtained amongst the group of lascars that had been squatting on the forward deck, squabbling vociferously, after the manner of their kind. Their disputation, whatever its cause, subsided into sullen mut-

terings, oddly mocked by the grumbling thunder below the northern horizon.

Quick shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Always scrapping like a pack of crows!" he complained. "I'd give the mess of them for half a dozen white men—Sou'wegians at that. . . . What d'ye s'pose that fellow was after?" he pursued, lowering his tone.

"'Tis nothing at all to me," returned O'Rourke; "'tis the lady's secret and be the same token none of mine." He yawned, stretching himself. "I'm thinking 'tis bedtime."

"Right-O," assented Quick. The chorus of the lascars arose again in full angry blast, and again the captain found need to caution them. "Stop that yapping, you——" Followed a lull, as previously.

"I'll stand the night watches," the captain took up the thread of conversation. "By morning we'll be far enough out for you to take hold without spraining the art of seamanship. G'dnight."

"Thank ye," said O'Rourke. In fact, he had long been sensible that he was very drowsy; the night wind in his face had something to do with that. "Good night," he returned, and went down the ladder to the deck.

At its foot he paused, turning curiously; it seemed that surely there must be some serious trouble

afoot in the crew. They were at it again, with a more ugly note in their yelping. The Irishman could see in the glimmer of the forecastle lantern a confused blur of naked, shining, brown bodies and limbs, apparently inextricably locked. A scream rang shrill and there followed the sound of a heavy fall.

Overhead, on the bridge, Quick was roaring himself hoarse, without effect. The sounds of shuffling, of blows, harsh-breathing, stifled cries, continued. A knot of the contestants swept, whirling, aft toward the superstructure. Something shot singing through the air; the wind of it fanned O'Rourke's cheek.

With an unconscious, surprised oath, O'Rourke stepped aside, his hand going toward his revolver. The missile struck a stanchion, glanced and fell clattering into the scuppers. Revolver in hand, he went forward to the rail, overlooking the struggling rabble on the deck below. But they seemed intent only on their private differences, and Quick's roars were bringing them to their senses. Gradually the tumult subsided, the contestants separating and slinking forward to their quarters.

"It may have been chance," O'Rourke conceded a bit doubtfully. He swung about and moved aft slowly, examining the deck intently. In a moment or two he stopped and picked up a long, thin-bladed knife, double-edged and keen as a razor.

The point was broken, having doubtless been snapped off at the moment of contact with the deck-house. O'Rourke turned it over soberly.

"Faith, I don't like to think it was intentional—but me head would have been split had it come two inches to the left."

He returned to the bridge, calling Quick aside. "You're armed?"

"Certainly—always armed when I'm dealing with these devils. Why?"

O'Rourke showed him the knife. Quick laughed at his theory. "Nothing in it," he was pleased to believe. Nevertheless, before he turned in, the wanderer clambered down the iron ladders to the engine-room for a conference with Dravos and Danny. He lay down under arms and only fell asleep after a long period of wakefulness troubled by dark forebodings. Ordinarily, too, his slumbers were sound enough, whatever the circumstances, but this night he awoke, writhing in the grip of nightmare, dreaming that the Pool of Flame had turned into a ball of malignant fire and was burning a hole through his breast, working with purpose towards his heart. A clutch at the chamois bag beneath his left arm, however, assured him that it was safe—and cool enough, for that matter. And he turned and slept again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE day came out of the East with a windy swagger; as Quick had foretold, a series of thunderstorms swept the sea before dawn, so that it, like the sky, seemed newly washed, clean and brilliant. The watery waste stretched wide and vacant before the *Ranee's* bows, untenanted by sail, unsmudged by smoke. The waves, breaking out here and there with glistening froth, raced the ship eastwards, running before the monsoon. As the hours lengthened, the temperature rose, making an awning nothing to be despised, yet the clearness of the atmosphere, the absence of humidity and the strong, sweet breath of the trade wind tempered the sun's ardour and made it a day to be marked with a white stone for the sense of purely animal well-being it induced.

O'Rourke relieved Quick at four bells of the morning watch and kept the deck for the remainder of the day, his meals being brought to him on the bridge. His duties were simple enough, requiring little more than a display of the habit of authority which sat so well on his broad shoulders. It was

no great trick to keep the crew in order: they went about their work peaceably enough and showed no signs of desiring to renew their disputations. Otherwise he had to keep an eye upon the helmsman and see that he held the *Ranee* to the course prescribed by Quick; and that was nothing difficult to a man of average intelligence. Naught but deep water lay between them and Bombay, so long as a direct course was shaped and maintained.

As the sunlit watches wore out and nothing untoward took place, O'Rourke's grim apprehensions dissipated into shadows. He began to believe with Quick that the affair of the winged knife was merely a hapchance accident, quite unpremeditated. Lascars do use knives promiscuously: the knife is their law and their leveller, making all men equal. And it's as dangerous to figure as an innocent bystander when lascars start in to arbitrate their disputes as it is to play that rôle at a "gun-fight" in a Western mining camp.

O'Rourke breathed more freely as this view of the matter obtruded itself the more insistently upon his judgment. The one blot on his satisfaction with the swing of his world was the fact that Mrs. Prynne had pleaded indisposition as an excuse for keeping to her berth the day long.

Below decks, Dravos and Danny were standing watch-and-watch, with clockwork regularity, where the former's beloved engines were justifying his

confidence and pride in them and clicking off their twenty knots without a hitch.

Now Danny happened to have "off" the first afternoon watch. O'Rourke from the bridge saw him come up the engine-room companion ladder, dive into the messroom for his dinner, and later emerge, picking his teeth and grinning self-complacency until his master could have kicked him, had such a course been politic before the crew or even consistent with the dignity of his office. It appeared that his sage counsel as to the wisdom of abstinence from flirtation had been wasted upon the servant, or else Cecile had proven herself quite irresistible.

Cecile herself presently came on deck for a breath of air, and spent ten minutes leaning her dark head entirely too close to Danny's shoulder, while the pair of them watched the foamy smother kicked up by the screw. Recalled to a sense of duty, she fluttered away to her mistress, and Danny strolled forward, beaming. O'Rourke caught glimpses of him from time to time as he sauntered here and there about the ship, smoking and eyeing the lascars with ill-concealed contempt; but it was close upon eight bells again before the valet hailed him, with a truly nautical pull at his forelock and an impudent grin, from the foot of the bridge ladder.

"What d'ye want, Don Juan?" demanded

O'Rourke with irony that was wasted upon the boy.

"A word to say to ye, sor, if I may make so bold."

O'Rourke glanced at the helmsman, and having long since made up his mind that the man was competent, left him in possession of the bridge for a space, and joined Danny below.

"What is it, ye gay deceiver?"

Danny lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Kape yer eye on thot black divvle up there, sor, for the love of Hiven, and don't look surprised at anything——"

O'Rourke moved a few paces aft, along the rail, to a point whence he could see the head and shoulders of the helmsman. "Well?"

"'Tis nawthin' I cud swear to, sor, but 'tis meself thot's mortal leary av these naygurs—rayspicts to ye—and—and——"

"Come, come! Out with it, Danny."

"Sure, sor, 'tis the serang. Have ye chanced to notice him, sor?"

O'Rourke glanced down to the fore deck, where the personage in question was standing at ease. "What of him?" he inquired, running his eye over the fellow's superb proportions. Indeed, he towered head and shoulders above his fellows, over whom he exercised a boatswain's authority. He was staring out to sea, his brown arms naked to

the shoulder and folded across his breast, the muscles and tendons of his long, gaunt legs standing out like steed bands. A dirty turban was wrapped about his head and a gaily coloured sash, much the worse for wear, concealed his breech-clout and the lower part of his thin, blue cotton chirt. His pose was one of natural, unaffected dignity, and something thoughtful.

"What of him?" repeated O'Rourke.

"'Tis nawthin' I'd take me oath to, sor, but I'm thinkin' he's the man who boarded the *Panjnab* at Suez, sor. And as for the naygur I run against on the s'loon deck, yer honour, he's his mortal twin."

"Ah," commented O'Rourke. "Thank you, Danny."

He continued to watch the serang until the latter, as if influenced by the fixity of the Irishman's regard, turned and stared directly into O'Rourke's eyes. For a full minute he gave him look for look, dark eyes steadfast and unyielding above his fine aquiline nose, then calmly turned his back, resuming his contemplation of the turbulent horizon.

An instant later Quick came up to relieve O'Rourke, and, eight bells sounding, Danny dived below to take Dravos' place. O'Rourke, unpleasantly impressed by the incident, still forbore to mention it to either of the ship's owners; he retired to think it over, and spent a long hour

consuming an indifferent cigar and studying the cracks in the bulkhead between his room and the cabin.

Without profit, however. Lacking more substantial proof than Danny's suspicions, he could arrive at no definite conclusion. It was possible, of course, that the lascar who had attacked Mrs. Prynne, divining O'Rourke's purpose, had gone ashore at Arden, and, putting himself in Quick's way, had succeeded in securing the position of serang. But this argued almost supernatural powers of divination on the lascar's part, unless he had managed to overhear O'Rourke's conversation with Mrs. Prynne immediately after the accident. And then O'Rourke recalled that Danny had met the lascar coming from the direction of the woman's stateroom.

All things were possible, all improbable. O'Rourke reserved judgment, meanwhile urged to a more scrupulous watchfulness. He said nothing of the matter to Mrs. Prynne—who emerged quite radiant from her long rest to dine with him———and kept his fears from the captain.

The night passed without incident; the second day dawned the counterpart of its predecessor, and wore away quietly enough. The ship's company seemed to have settled down to routine, in the confidence that their voyage was to be a normal one. Barring himself and possibly Danny—though Danny was habitually thoughtless and the Irishman's own ap-

prehensions were becoming lulled—none had grounds for any fears to the contrary, thought O'Rourke in his error.

It fell to him to stand the first dog-watch, from four to six in the evening. Shortly after he ascended the bridge, it was his happiness to be joined by Mrs. Prynne, who improved the moment to express her gratification with the propitious tide in her affairs. The King's courier was pleased to declare herself very well pleased indeed, though she admitted, under jocular pressure, that she considered she was roughing it. Captain Quick's quarters were by no means palatial, and the bill of fare, while substantially composed, lacked something of variety; but that was all a part of the great and fascinating game she played—the game of secret service to His Majesty, Edward VII.

Not that alone, but she was comforted by the assurance that her voyage would soon be over, her mission discharged, her responsibility a thing of the past. She would be glad to see Bombay.

"One never knows, you know, Colonel O'Rourke," she said with a little gesture expressive of her allowance for the unforeseen.

O'Rourke divined she had something on her mind which she hesitated to voice, though they were practically alone; the man at the wheel was a nonentity—a bronze statue in a faded shirt, ragged turban and soiled cummerbund.

"Then 'tis yourself will be glad, I gather, to be rid of us, madam?"

She smiled, deprecatory. "What would you?" she asked in French, with a significant glance up into O'Rourke's eyes—a glance that, implying, as it did, a certain amount of intimacy, a mutual understanding, a barrier down between them, in other days would fairly have distracted the Irishman. But now it served only to remind him of other eyes that had coquetry for him alone.

"It's not precisely pleasant to be constantly apprehensive," the woman continued in the same tongue, "even when one has a Colonel O'Rourke to look to for protection."

"Ah, madame!" expostulated the wanderer. "But what makes ye so positive I'd not turn tail and run away from any real danger?"

She gave him a look that brimmed with mirth. "A man who is a coward," she said slowly, "doesn't stand still and draw a revolver when a heavy knife is thrown at his head."

"Quick told ye, madam?"

"No, I saw—heard the quarrelling on the forward deck and got to the companionway in time to see what happened. Had you not been so intent on your search for the knife, you would have seen me. As it was, I slipped below again without attracting attention."

"But why?"

"To get my revolver, *monsieur le colonel.*"

"'Twas naught but an accident——"

"You do not believe that yourself, colonel dear; for my part, I——"

"Well?"

"Someone tried my door last night, after you'd retired."

"Ye are sure?" doubted O'Rourke, disturbed.

"Quite. I was awake—thinking; I heard you come below and close your door at eight bells; long after there were footsteps—someone walking in his bare feet—in the saloon. Then the knob was turned, very gently. Fortunately, the door was bolted; someone put a shoulder to it, but it held fast. I caught up my revolver—indeed and I am very reckless with it, sir!—and opened the door myself. The saloon was quite empty."

"Ye shouldn't have risked that——"

"I had to know, with so much at stake," she said simply.

O'Rourke endeavoured to manufacture a plausible and reassuring explanation to the fact. "Quick, Danny, or Dravos, mistaking their rooms——"

"It was none of them. Captain Quick was on deck; I heard his voice almost simultaneously; surely I couldn't mistake that." She laughed. "Nor would your man or Mr. Dravos have been so stealthy, so instant to escape."

"But—but——"

"My theory, if you will have it, is that mine enemy of the *Panjnab* is one of the crew of the *Ranee*, monsieur."

Mrs. Prynne made this statement as quietly as though she were commenting on the weather. But her belief chimed so exactly with his own that O'Rourke was stricken witless and at a loss to frame a satisfactory refutation. He was silent for some moments, his lips a thin hard line, a crinkle of anxiety between his brows.

"If ye'd only permitted me to attend to him——" he growled at length.

"You are right," she admitted, "but—I am desolated—the mischief's done."

"Faith, yes!" he sighed dejectedly. His gaze roved the deck and fastened upon the serang. "It might be any one of them," he considered aloud.

"Any one. For instance, though—the serang?"

"Why d'ye suspect him more than another?" he demanded, startled.

"Call it feminine intuition, if you like. The man looks capable of anything."

"Yes. But sure, there's no telling at all."

"No telling," she concurred quietly. "We can but wait, watch, hope that I imagined the hand at my door."

"There might be something in that."

"I am neither nervous nor an imaginative woman."

"At all events, I'll go bail 'twill not happen a second time."

"How do you propose to prevent it?"

"Sure, the simplest way in the world. I myself will stand guard in the saloon, madam."

"But no, monsieur; I can better afford to lose a little sleep than have you forfeit your rest. Besides, I have Cecile . . ."

There ensued an argument without termination; he remained obdurate, she insistent. Only the appearance of Quick on the stroke of four bells forced them to shelve the subject. It was resumed at the dinner table and carried out in a light manner of banter for a time, dropped and forgotten, apparently, by all but O'Rourke.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The night fell clear as crystal and wonderfully bright with stars; the wind went down with the sun, then rose again refreshed and waxed to half a gale. At midnight O'Rourke, leaving the bridge, left the *Ranee* driving steadily through a racing sea, through a world noisy with the crisp rattle and crash of breaking crests.

Fortifying himself with strong coffee, the adventurer settled himself in a chair by the foot of the companionway steps leading up from the tiny saloon that served as dining-room for all but the crew of the tramp. From this position he commanded both entrances, port and starboard, from the upper deck, as well as the doors that flanked them on either hand, to the quarters occupied by Mrs. Prynne and to Dravos' stateroom, which was empty and would be so until the next change of watch.

The succeeding hours dragged interminably, quiet and uneventful. . . .

About six bells the moon got up, and its rays, filtering through the heavy-ribbed glass of the sky-

light, filled the saloon with an opalescent shimmer that assorted incongruously with the dull glow of the electric bulbs—dull, because there was something wrong with the dynamo, according to Dravos.

O'Rourke, weary and yawning, watched the milky rainbow dance upon the half-opaque glass overhead for several moments before it conveyed to him a warning. Then immediately he abandoned his seat and stretched himself out upon a transom against the after bulkhead, whence he could see something less of the upper gangway, but sufficient for his purposes. For his chair had been beneath the skylight, and the wings of that were open for ventilation.

"'Tis safer here," he considered. "There'll be no dropping one of those long knives on me now, be premeditated inadvertence, I'm thinking."

He gaped tremendously. The peace of the night, the singing of the waves against the *Ranee's* sides, the deep throb and unbroken surge of her engines. and the sustained, clear note of the monsoon in her wire rigging—these combined with physical fatigue to soothe the man, to lull him into fantastic borderland of dreams. Yet such was his command of self that he would not yield to the caressing touch of drowsiness, but merely lay motionless and at rest, communing with his fancy. And that led him out of the sordid saloon of the *Ranee* across the seas that lay ahead of that ship's prow, to the fair

land whither he was to convey the Pool of Flame. . . .

Abruptly he leapt to his feet, wide awake and raging.

A blow was still sounding through the saloon, a dull crash. Buried half way to the hilt in the bulkhead back of the transom a knife quivered. Instinctively the wanderer's fingers had closed upon the grip of his revolver. He pulled the trigger almost before he realised what had happened and sent a bullet winging toward a spot on the gangway above where a pair of long brown legs had been but now were not. On the heels of that fruitless shot he sent another, this time with no murderous intent, but to warn the captain on the bridge. Here at last was an issue forced, animus proven, assassination indisputably attempted.

He sprang for the companionway, was half way up it in a thought, his heart hot within him, mouth dry with thirst for that lascar's blood. Not a third time should the man escape his judgment at the hands of O'Rourke, he swore.

A stentorian roar saluted him as he gained the deck——a bellow choked and ending in a sickening gurgle. O'Rourke in a flash swung on his heel. Simultaneously he came face to face with Quick. He could have cried aloud in pity.

The captain swayed before him, a massively built figure clothed all in white, huge arms trembling to-

wards his head, revolver dropping from a nerveless hand, his chin fallen forward on his chest, a stupid, weary smile on his face, and a dark and hideous smear spreading swiftly over the bosom of his shirt.

A cry of horror, despair and rage stuck in the wanderer's throat. Quick, who had hailed his appearance on the *Ranee* at Aden as a harbinger of good luck, had been foully murdered. His dominant emotion of the moment, an intense and pitiful solicitude for the dying man, threw him off his guard. Under its influence he forgot the desperate case to which this tragedy brought all aboard the *Ranee*, put out his arms, received the falling body, and let it gently to the deck.

But in a trice he was alive again to his own peril. In the twinkling of an eye he saw a flash of light gliding towards him with resistless impetus. Intuitively he swung to one side, to the right, and leapt to his feet. At that the knife, a kris sinuous and keen, ran cold upon the flesh of his chest, slit through his shirt, caught in the thong that held the Pool of Flame, and tore out, leaving a flapping hole and scraping a hand's breadth of skin from his forearm. Heedless of this, only in fact subconsciously aware that the chamois bag had fallen to the deck, he caught at the hand that had wielded the kris; his fingers closed about the wrist, and, bracing himself, he swung the assassin off his feet. So

doing, his fingers slipped on the man's greasy skin and he stumbled off his balance.

His object, however, had been accomplished. The murderer, hurled a yard or more through the air, fell and slid along the deck into a group of lascars, one of whom, like a nine-pin, was knocked over and fell atop of him.

O'Rourke recovered and stepped forward, revolver poised to administer the quietus to the murderer—an amiable intention which was, however, doomed to frustration. With almost inconceivable swiftness the group of lascars had become a mere tangle of arms and legs, a mélange of struggling limbs and bodies. Where he had thought to find a single prostrate form, there were six struggling in confusion on the deck.

For a thought he stayed his finger on the trigger, waiting to pick out the undermost and slay him first of all, unwilling, furthermore, to waste one of the four invaluable cartridges remaining in his revolver. And then—unexpectedly the tragedy seemed over and done with altogether.

From the bottom of the heap of bodies a terrible cry of mortal anguish shrilled loud; and almost at once the mob seemed to resolve into its original elements. Five lascars crawled, arose, or flung themselves away from the sixth, who lay inert, prone, limbs still twitching, a knife buried in his back.

For a thought the tableau held, there in the pure

brilliance of the moonlight: the half a dozen standing figures, O'Rourke a space apart from the rest, and two bodies, the one face down, Quick with a face to the stars, each with its dread background: a black stain that grew and spread slowly upon the white, dazzling planks. . . .

Quietly the tallest of the lascars moved forward, knelt and drew the knife from the back of his dead fellow. He straightened up, facing O'Rourke without a tremor, his eyes afire, and wiped the blade of the kris on his cummerbund.

"Do not shoot, sahib," he said smoothly in excellent English. "Do not shoot, sahib, for it is I who have avenged. This dog," and with his toe he stirred the thing at his feet, "ran amok. Now he is dead."

This was the serang who spoke. O'Rourke eyed him coldly through a prolonged silence. At length, "That seems quite evident," he admitted coolly. "Pick up that body and throw it overboard!" he commanded sharply.

In obedience to a sign from the serang, two of the lascars seized the body. A subsequent splash overside told the Irishman that his order had been carried out. But he heard it abstractedly, confronted as he was with a problem whose difficulty was not to be underestimated, the problem embodied in the statuesque, imperturbable serang.

It was hard to know what to do, what to believe,

what action to take. If he were right in his surmise, the serang should rightly be shot down instantly, without an instant's respite. Yet the heartless brutality upon which his theory was based made him hesitate. It was difficult to believe that the serang had been able to accomplish what O'Rourke was inclined to credit him with: that he, the wielder of the kris, the murderer of Quick, thrown off his feet by the Irishman's attack, had deliberately involved his fellows with him in his fall and profited by the confusion to slay one upon whom he could throw the blame for all that had happened.

The weapon quivered in O'Rourke's grasp. More than once in that brief debate he was tempted to shoot the fellow on suspicion. Yet he held his hand; he could not be positive. With every circumstance against him, he might still be telling the truth. The whole horrible affair might boil down to nothing more than an insane crime of a crazy Malay, one who, as the serang claimed, had "run amok."

He had not made up his mind, when his thoughts were given a new turn by a new complication, in the shape of Mrs. Prynne herself. That lady came up the companion steps with no apparent hesitation, no fear or apprehension; quietly and confidently alert, on the other hand, she was visibly armed and prepared against danger in whatever form she might have to encounter it.

She came directly to the adventurer, without

so much as a glance for the group of lascars or the grim evidences of tragedy upon the deck. O'Rourke shut his teeth with exasperation. Whatever he decided to believe of the serang, whether his judgment said of the man, "Guilty," or "Not guilty," he dared risk nothing with the woman present. He could not tell what hell of murder and mutiny he might not let loose upon the *Ranee*, did he make one ill-advised or hasty move. Alone, he could have faced the situation with equanimity: with the woman by his side, he felt as though handcuffed.

"You are hurt, Colonel O'Rourke?"

"A mere scratch, madam—an inch of skin shaved off me arm. Be good enough to return to the saloon, waken Danny and send him to me."

She ignored the curtness of his tone, even as she ignored his wish. "What has happened?" she demanded, ranging herself by his side. "Who is that—there on the deck?" Her voice rising a note, foreboded hysteria.

"Quick—stabbed. I didn't want ye to see. A lascar ran amok, cut down the captain, was killed himself—kindness," the irrepressible humourist broke out, "of our little brown brother, the serang."

His eyes never left the latter; not for an instant did he take his attention from the cluster of dark figures; he was more than every ready to defend himself should they make any overt move, deeming his attention distracted.

"She was visibly armed and prepared against danger in whatever form she might have to encounter it"

"What will you do?"

"How can I say? Do ye, for the love of God, get below and leave me to deal with these fiends in me own fashion."

"Which," she returned equably, "is precisely what I shall not do."

"If that's the case," he said brusquely, "have the kindness to hand me the revolver by the captain's side, and—ye might see if the poor fellow still lives."

He heard a quick rustle of skirts and the woman's hand closed over his, pressing into his palm the weapon he had desired. As promptly, without further words, she turned to Quick.

The adventurer deliberated briefly, while she bent over the captain, making a hurried examination. "He is badly wounded," O'Rourke heard her say, as he arrived at his decision, "but not dead."

"Praise God for that! . . . I must ask ye, madam, to back me up. It is necessary to clear the decks. Are ye ready?" He saw, out of the tail of his eye, that she had sprung to her feet. "Now, ye curs," he thundered, with a menacing pistol in either hand, "get forward, the lot of ye. Move, ye blackguards!"

They went expeditiously, crowding between the deck-house and the rail, huddling together as if for mutual protection. The serang was the last to move, and went reluctantly, or seemed to.

Yet that was no time to judge him for a minor fault. O'Rourke herded the pack before him, watched them scramble down the ladder to the fore-deck, then backed to the spot where the woman stood above the captain. His arm was paining him somewhat, with the irritating, stinging ache that such wounds produce, and he thrust one revolver into his pocket, clasping a hand above the hurt.

In a flash realisation of his loss came to him; he clutched the rail with a cry. The Pool of Flame, his sacred trust, was gone! His eyes searched the deck wildly, but found no trace of the round leather bag with its precious burden. Despair gripped his heart in a clutch of ice, and for a space the ship reeled about him. . . .

He found himself gazing blankly into the woman's solicitous eyes. "What is it? What is it?" he heard her voice repeating breathlessly. He knew that his own lips moved for some seconds without sound as he strove to answer her. The words, when they came, should have been quite unintelligible to her; he realised this almost as soon as he had uttered them: "The Pool of Flame!"

Then he stumbled forward, crying aloud for the serang. Half-way to the ladder he halted; that individual's head and shoulders were lifting above the level of the deck. O'Rourke covered him and called him aft as he again retreated to the scene of the tragedy.

Had he been in a condition to think coherently, he might have acted more prudently. But maddened, he was able to grasp but one fact: that the Pool of Flame was gone and must be recovered at whatever hazard.

The lascar came with what might have seemed suspicious alacrity, considering the fact that he was coerced, that O'Rourke held him at the pistol's point. Gaunt and sombre in the moonlight, moving noiselessly in his bare feet, head up and arms swinging limp, he advanced without a pause until about six feet from the Irishman; at which distance O'Rourke, collecting his wits, found voice enough to bid the fellow, "Stop!"

The serang halted, impassive, unmoved.

"The sahib has called," he said in an even voice. "I am come. What is the sahib's will with me?"

His words, together with his half-indolent, half-defiant, wholly contemptuous bearing, supplied the one thing needful to restore to the adventurer his self-control. O'Rourke drew himself up, master of self once more, and looked the lascar in the eye.

"You stand," he said slowly, choosing his words, "on the edge of the grave. Do you comprehend that, dog?"

"Aye, sahib!"

"I have called ye, then, to demand back that which is mine, the leather bag which ye stole when ye slew your brother, pretending falsely it was he

who had slain the captain. I counsel ye, speak truth and render back to me that which ye have stolen."

The serang stiffened, his eyes glistening in the moonlight. "Sahib!" he cried as if in supplication.

"No words, dog!" cried O'Rourke sternly. "Do as I bid ye, or abide the result of disobedience!"

"The sahib," said the serang slowly, "is full of eyes and wisdom. He sees what no man would believe he could see. I am content." He bowed his head with curious submissiveness, stretching forth his palms as if in token of surrender.

O'Rourke caught at his breath. He had scarcely hoped for this; he had merely called the serang aft as the leader of the lascars, hoping to frighten him into revealing whichever of his comrades had stolen the great ruby——if he knew.

"Ye have, then, the leather bag?" he demanded, exultation in his voice.

"Aye, sahib; or, if not that, I have that which was therein."

"The stone?"

"Aye, sahib."

"Then give it me."

"I am the sahib's slave." The serang flashed a strange smile at the revolver in O'Rourke's hand. His attitude puzzled O'Rourke; he would hardly have believed this of the man; rather he could have conceived of him as denying the theft to the last

and fighting like an unchained fiend to retain his booty. His present pose was out of character, or the Irishman misjudged him.

Out of character or no, it was comfortable. The serang, with head bent, was fumbling in the folds of his sash; O'Rourke thought him over long about it, yet was inclined to give him time in view of his abject surrender.

At length, still smiling oddly, the man lifted his eyes and stretched forth a hand tight closed. "The sahib," he said gently, "shall see that his servant spoke truth. Let this weigh with the sahib for mercy. Behold!"

The brown fingers unclosed and in the hollow of his palm trembled that which seemed a ball of crystallised rose fire, the stone that man has named the Pool of Flame. O'Rourke uttered a low cry of satisfaction, stepping forward to snatch up the jewel. Simultaneously he was aware of a quick gasp from the direction of the woman, followed, ere he could account for them, by two pistol shots.

The adventurer groaned, pitching forward blindly, one side of his head, from the ear to the temple, a-quiver with an agony as if a white-hot iron had seared him there. He stretched forth an arm aimlessly and gripped an iron stanchion, stopping his fall, and hung there for what seemed an eon, sea and skies swimming blood-red before his eyes, in his ears a thunderous rushing as of mighty waters.

By a supreme effort of will he kept himself

half-erect, clinging to the rail, and opened his eyes. So briefly had pain blinded him that it was patent barely a second had elapsed since the firing of the shots. To his left a stricken lascar was still in the act of falling; before him Mrs. Prynne stood motionless, her face a mask of horror, revolver still poised; to the right the serang, drawing a kris, was smiling sardonically, his eyes fixed upon the woman who had set at naught his plans.

O'Rourke tried to call a warning to her, for it was plain that she was appalled by what she had done, heedless of all but the man she had killed; but it was as if the bullet that creased his temple had temporarily paralysed him; his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth and he could neither move nor speak.

Powerless (he believed), he watched the serang gather himself together, like some gaunt cat, and spring; in two strides he would have been upon the woman and the night had been crowned with its most pitiful crime. Yet in midair, O'Rourke saw the man falter and throw back, dropping the kris and clutching frantically at nothing.

Stupidly the adventurer saw the smoke trickling from the muzzle of his own revolver and knew that, somehow, he had managed to pull the trigger. His heart leapt in his breast, so keen was his gratitude. Trembling in every limb, he essayed a second time to fire and put a final period to the serang's

career. But his shot went wide and the cylinder jammed so that the hammer would not rise a second time. With an oath he let go the rail and attempted to bridge the distance between himself and the lascar, who was now at a considerable distance reeling away toward the rail.

But his overtaxed strength, sapped by loss of blood, failed him; and malice infused new vigour into the serang, new power to accomplish his final fiendish act.

Grinning with anguish, the man leapt away from O'Rourke, staggered and, jerking back his arm, flung the Pool of Flame from him with all his might.

O'Rourke paused, petrified with despair. The great stone, glinting in the moonlight like the very heart of fire, described a long and flaming arc and . . . the sea leapt up with a hiss to welcome it and it was gone.

A bitter cry broke from the Irishman's lips; he made for the man, whom he would gladly have killed with his bare hands. But again he failed. The lascar, perhaps guessing his intention, was at the last too quick for him.

By a supreme effort the gaunt serang seized the rail, lifted himself upon it, and dropped over the side, following that to win which he had given his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Mrs. Prynne, roused out of her semi-stupor by O'Rourke's cry, with some return of her habitual clearness of thought, stepped to the companionway and called for her maid.

O'Rourke passed a hand over his eyes, and brought it away black with blood, but was no more than half aware of this. Dazed and heart-broken, he stared blankly round the shambles that was the deck, then, recovering slightly, saw Cecile join her mistress, and realised that, whatever his personal grief, pain and despair, he must play the part of the O'Rourke. So he turned and staggered down into the saloon.

Danny was in his berth, sleeping the childlike and loglike sleep that was ever his: Dravos, below, his ears deafened by the mighty chant of his engines, had been no more conscious of the drama on deck than had Danny. O'Rourke caught the boy with hands that gripped his shoulders cruelly, and shook him awake, then methodically booted him up the steps to the deck.

Once there, Danny came to his proper senses and fell with a will to the tasks O'Rourke set for him.

With Cecile he lifted the unconscious captain and bore him down to his berth, then left him to the ministrations of mistress and maid and returned to throw overboard the last corpse, that of the lascar whom the serang had set to slay the adventurer from behind.

O'Rourke himself proceeded to the bridge, where he found the helmsman still at the wheel, soberly keeping the vessel on her course. The circumstance at the time surprised him; but it afterwards was developed by dint of cross-examination of the remainder of the crew that the serang had specially exempted Quick and Dravos from the general massacre, they being held necessary to the navigation of the ship. He had likewise put strict injunctions on the helmsman not to desert the wheel, whatever the tide of battle, whether for or against his brethren. The stabbing of Quick seemed to have been accidental, or necessary under circumstances unforeseen.

As a matter of fact, the remainder of the lascars were thoroughly cowed and proved unbelievably docile for the balance of the trip—only too eager to curry favour by prompt execution of orders and full confession of details of the serang's scheme of mutiny.

Thus it was that the voyage of the *Ranee* from Aden to Bombay was pushed through without further fatality. To the Irishman, however, must go

more than half the credit: for forty-eight hours he never left the bridge nor once closed his eyes in slumber. Wounded and suffering intensely, he dared not for a single instant leave the lascars in possession of the deck, however meek and humble their attitude. They were herded in the forecastle, nor permitted to venture a foot aft save on duty, and then only under the guard of Mrs. Prynne and Cecile. Dravos and Danny hardly ever left the engine-room; the one slept there in the infernal and incessant clangour, while the other watched under arms, turn and turn about. It remained for O'Rourke to afford new proof of his marvellous powers of endurance.

He gave it willingly; but the effort, the sustained wakefulness at a time when he was tortured by the knowledge of his immense loss, drained him of his reserve strength to a degree more great than he himself understood, and which the others, perhaps, scarcely credited, seeing him as they did hour after hour erect, smiling, assured and competent.

It was not indeed until the *Ranee*, on the stroke of the hour, the evening of the fifteenth day of June, walked smartly into Bombay harbour, the international code signal "NJ" fluttering from her peak, rounded Colabra and dropped anchor off the point; not until Danny and Dravos, free at length from their toil in the broiling engine-room, came on deck to relieve him, that O'Rourke collapsed—stumbled

down the bridge ladder and lurched drunkenly down the saloon companionway. His head humming with sleep, his brain bemused with fatigue and pain, his eyes heavy, he brushed by Mrs. Prynne without seeing her or even hearing her low cry of pity and solicitude; and so entering the first stateroom that he came to, threw himself, already asleep, into the berth.

As he did so a loaded revolver dropped from his numb fingers. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It was night when O'Rourke awoke; he found himself staring wide-eyed at the ceiling of the state-room, upon which rippled wavering lines of light reflected through the porthole by the waters without. His mind for the time was a blank; he was merely conscious that he was rested and very thirsty, and that the ship was motionless.

Then in a blinding flash memory returned to him. He rose, curiously light-headed and strangely weak, pushed open the door and stepped into the saloon.

It was lighted, if poorly, by a smoky kerosene lamp dependent from a beam above the centre-table, and wore a hollow, dingy air of desolation for all that Danny slept there, his vivid head pillowed on arms crossed before him on the table. The ship was utterly silent, and the O'Rourke's sensitive instinct told him that it was tenanted only by himself and the servant.

He clapped a hand on Danny's shoulder and shook him into wakefulness. The boy leapt to his feet with a cry and, seizing O'Rourke's hand, began to sob upon it—a touching but disconcerting per-

formance, to the last degree exasperating to a man thirsting and famished.

O'Rourke, as gently as he could, disengaged his hand and thrust Danny away, at the same time indicating in no uncertain tones that he preferred meat and drink to emotional crises. Provided with a duty, Danny's sentimental nature was diverted; he bustled away and returned with an excellent cold meal—sandwiches, a salad, cheese, and other edibles upon a tray graced likewise by a bottle of champagne. And you are to believe that the master fell to and wolfed it all, to the last crumb and the last drop.

A new man, refreshed, he demanded a pipe, and, with his head cocked on one side and something of his old humour twinkling in his eye, what time it was not clouded with bewilderment and concern at the answers he received, cross-examined his valet.

"How long," was his first question, "will I have slept now, Danny ye divvle?"

"Wan complete round av the clock, yer honour."

"Where are we?"

"At anchor, sor, off the Fort in Bombay harbour."

"Umm-hm. I'm by way of remembering something of that. What of the captain?"

"Raymoved, yer honour, to a horsepittle ashore, sor, to con-valesce. At laste, I'm thinking thot's the word the doctor used, sor."

"He's on the mend, then?"

"Aw, yiss, yer honour; sure and he is just that. Faith, and wasn't it the doctor himself was sayin' 'twould do him no manner of harm to lose as much blood wance a year?"

"Good. And Dravos?"

"Gone ashore, sor, this afternoon, for a conference wid the authorities, rayspictin' the mutiny, sor. *And* not come back yit."

O'Rourke pulled at his cigar, regarded regretfully the empty glass before him, and with some visible reluctance put the question that, more than aught else, he had wished to put ever since he had eaten.

"And Mrs. Prynne?"

"Aw, yer honour!"

"What's the matter, Danny?"

"Sure, sor, and axin' yer pardon for spakin' so, and manin' no manner of disrayspict whatsoever——"

"What the divvle, Danny!"

Danny drew himself up with an air, bristling indignation. "Sure, and 'tis meself never seen the loike av thim wimmin for rank ingratichude, sor. And afther all thot meself had said to thot black-eyed Frinch vixen——"

"Danny!"

"Nor, sor, not wan worrd av ut will I widdror, not if yer honour discharges me wid me usual month's notice, sor, this minute. Faix, didn't *I*

see? No more and the anchor was down, sor, and yersilf did to the worrld in yer berth, sor, thin thim two does be after hailin' a boat and intendin' to go ashore, widout so much as a fare-ye-well, and me meanin' the most honourable intintions in the world toward the maid——"

"Have your intentions ever been aught else toward any woman ye ever won a smile from, spalpeen?"

"Aw, now, yer honour——"

"Get on with your story. What about Mrs. Prynne?" demanded O'Rourke, eyeing his servant curiously and trying to fathom his but half-disguised and wholly awkward air of self-esteem. Plainly the boy thought highly of himself because of something he had accomplished, some exploit of prowess or stroke of diplomacy as yet undisclosed.

"Yissor. . . . I was tellin' ye it seemed to me the height of maneness she was displayin', ma'nin' this same Mrs. Prynne, whin 'twas mesilf knew, none betther, how much ye've laid out on her account and hersilf not waitin' to settle up wid ye——"

"What business was that of yours?"

"'Twas none, sor. But yersilf had keeled over and was did to ivrything, and what am I for if not to look out for ye at such times? . . . So I'm afther sthoppin' thim two just as they would be lavin' their staterooms, and sz'I, 'Missus Prynne,' sz'I, 'me masther's compliments and he'd like a worrd

wid yees before ye're gone entirely.' And 'What's this?' sz'she wid a fine show of surprise—the dayceytful huzzy!—though I'm watchin' her and thinkin' she was frightened about somethin', from the white turn av the face av her. Sz'she: 'Tis in the divvle's own hurry I am the minute,' or worrds to the same iffict. Sz'she: 'And phwat will he be wantin' av me?' 'A momint's conversation wid ye,' sz'I. And sz'she: 'I've no time. Let me pass.' 'I'll be doing,' sz'I, 'nawthin' like thot,' for be now I'm thinkin' there's somethin' deeper behint her fluster and flurry thin a mere desire to bilk ye—p'rhaps 'twas this thing in-too-ishun I've heard ye mintion. And the next minit I'm sure av ut, for she goes white as snow in the face and the eyes of her begins to burn like cold grane fire and she screams to Cecile for help and is afther whipping out a gun to blow me out av her way wid; but 'tis mesilf thot's be way av bein' too quick for her and takin' the pistol away; and be the mercy av the Saints Misther Dravos hears the shindy and hops down just in time to snatch another gun out of the hand av that same Cecile, and he grabs the gurl and truns her into a stateroom and shuts the dure on her and——"

"And," interrupted O'Rourke in a black rage, rising and turning back his sleeves—"And now I'm going to give ye the father and mother of all trashings, ye insolent puppy! How dare ye lay hands on a lady——"

"Ow, murther!" chattered the boy, leaping away. "Be aisy, yer honour, and hear me out, for 'tis thin ye'll not be blamin' me, but if ye do I'll take the batin' widout a worrd, sor."

"Very well," assented O'Rourke ominously. "But be quick about it, for I'm mistrustful of ye altogether. Get on, ye whelp!"

Danny placed the table between them with considerable expedition. "Aw, listhen now," he pleaded. "While Misther Dravos was 'tendin' to Cecile, this Missis Prynne was scrappin' like a wildcat, scratching and bitin', and 'tis all I can do to kape her from doing me a hurrt; but finally I'm afther wrappin' me arrms tight about her and holdin' her so, and I'm makin' a grab at her waist whin be accident like what do I catch hold av but something undernathe as big as a hin's egg—a stone she's carryin' round her neck, the same as yer honour did wid the Pool av Flame; and be the feel av ut ut's the same entirely; and thin I'm sure 'tis the same and thot some sculduggery's be way av havin' been put upon ye."

"What the divvle!"

"Wan momint more. . . . Now in fightin' wid me the collar av her waist has come unfastened and meself can see the string av ribbon that's holding the thing there. So I sez to mesilf, sz'I, 'Tis strange enough to bear investigatin',' sz'I, 'an' I'll be takin' a chanst at this if the masther do be afther

flayin' me alive.' So I calls Misther Dravos and gets him to hould her fast while I takes out me knife and cuts thot ribbon and pulls the thing out widout any immodesty whatever; and there on thot ribbon is a chamois-case, all sewed up, and I'm rippin' it open an' finding—*this!*"

"God in Heaven!" cried O'Rourke, stupefied and agape; for Danny, having worked up to his climax, had dramatically whipped from his pocket and cast upon the table between them the Pool of Flame.

Thunderstruck, the adventurer stared at the glorious stone until it swam beneath his gaze, pulsing with its secret fires, so unreal in his sight and understanding that he could not believe himself sane. Then heavily he let himself down into a chair and put forth an unsteady hand to take up the ruby. Only its weight, its cold polish, the sharpness of its great facets, rid him of incredulity, made him believe that he really held the stone in his hand, however impossible it were that it should be so.

He looked up, blind to the glee and triumph in Danny's face.

"How did ye come be this?" he demanded, speaking slowly and steadily, as one who, having drunk more than enough, listens to his own enunciation to detect in it the slur that liquor brings. "I mean—I mean—how could ye have taken this from the woman when it lay all the time at the bottom of the sea—six hundred miles and more behind us?"

"Ask Misther Dravos if ye do not belave me, sor. How would I be havin' it at all, widout I got it like I've told ye? . . . 'Tis the real Pool of Flame ye're handlin'; that's sure. T'other one—the stone the serang flung into the say, sor, was a counterfeit."

"How do ye know that?"

"Aisily enough, yer honour: be puttin' the maid Cecile on the witness stand. 'Twas this way: I tuk the stone from Missus Prynne and Misther Dravos and mesilf locked her in her cabin. Thin afther talkin' things over we let Cecile out and be dint av threats and persuashions, got her to tell what she knew."

"Go on."

"She sez thot Frinchman ye kilt back there in Algiers, sor, is at the bottom av it all, only he's not did because ye didn't make a clane job av ut, but lift him wid the laste susphicion av the breath av life in the body av him."

"I was afraid of that," nodded O'Rourke. "The next time we meet, Des Trebes and I, there'll be no mistake about it."

"She sez thot befure he fought wid ye he'd taken measuremints av the stone and made a wax mould av ut, so thot whin he failed to kill yersilf and had got his strength back, he wint to Paris and had an imitashun av ut made there—somehow be fusing chape stones together and all thot, I belave. 'Twas

ixpinsive an' him tight up for money, so he takes Missus Prynne into partnership and she puts up the cash. Thin—they've been watchin' yersilf all the time, sor—they sets Cap'n Hole onto ye to get the stone away, and he does it like ye know. Afther ye escaped from the *Pelican*, he goes ashore and mates the lady at her hotel and daylivers the stone to her, getting his pay and the imitashun into the bargain, he insistin' on thot because he knows ye'll be comin' back for the Pool av Flame, and he's afraid av ye—afraid ye'll kill him if he can't turn over a ruby to ye like the wan he stole. So 'twas the faked stone we tuk from him thot same night and the same we brought aboard the *Ranee* and the same the serang sthole from ye."

"I begin to see. But how about the serang? What did Cecile have to say in explanation of him?"

"She couldn't account for him at all, sor, save thot mebbe the natives in Rangoon had somehow got wind av the fact that the stone was comin' back and a gang av thim set out to stale ut. She sez Missus Prynne niver cud account for the way they discovered she had ut, but they seemed to know pretty certain sure, sor, for ye'll recall they niver bothered ye at all at first, and 'twas only be chanst, like, thot the serang got the imitashun from ye."

"But what about Des Trebes? Did the maid say?"

"No more than he'd been lift in Paris, sor."

"And why? Why didn't he himself take the stone East instead of the woman?"

"I niver asked, sor, but belike 'twas hersilf thot, havin' put the money into ut, insisted in collectin' the reward because she misthrusted the blackhearted scoundrel intirely."

"And what 've ye done with the two of them, Mrs. Prynne and the maid? Are they still locked up safely?"

"Divvle a bit, yer honour. 'Twas impossible to kape them so, Dravos said, wid Missus Prynne threatening to yell bloody murther out av the poort and kick up such a row thot the authorities wud be down on us—if we didn't let her go. Besides, we'd got what we wanted out av her, and pwhat was the use av holdin' her anny longer?"

"So ye let them go?"

"Yissor."

"I could kill ye for it," said O'Rourke, "and Dravos, too; for there's a deal of matters I'd like to be inquiring into with the lady this blessed minute. But, Danny boy, there's nothing in the world I can't forgive ye now, for what ye've done for me, and 'twill be a strange thing if I don't serve ye handsomely when I come into me fortune. . . .

Now don't be standin' there like a ninny, but be off with ye and pack me things before I lift me hand to ye. 'Tis in haste we are—with Des Trebes alive and Mrs. Prynne on the loose; and there'll be no such thing as rest for either of us until we reach Rangoon."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"DANNY . . ." said O'Rourke without looking up from the occupation which had engrossed his attention for the last three hours; and for the first time in that period he spoke audibly, making an end to the mumbled confabulation he had been holding with himself, a Murray's Guide, a Bradshaw, an Indian railway guide, several steamship folders and a large coloured map of the Indian Empire.

"Danny . . ."

A slight but none the less sincere snore was all his answer. In a chair by the window of O'Rourke's room in the Hotel Apollo Bunder, Danny was napping candidly. His master looked up, regarded the boy without prejudice for a moment, then deftly shied the Bradshaw across the room, missing Danny's head by a scant inch. The dull double impact of the book against the wall and on the floor brought Danny up standing in an instant, blinking and gasping and swaying with sleep, but with his head down, his fists clenched and his general air that of a man ready for trouble.

"Now," said he heavily, "I've got ye . . ."

Murray's Guide followed the Bradshaw with a more accurate aim and the boy's dream abruptly dissolved into the consciousness of real pain. With a small yelp he abandoned his fighting pose and began to hop on his right foot with both hands clasped about the left shin.

"Ow!" he cried. "Phwat th' divvle at all——!"

O'Rourke reached for the railway guide. "Shut up!" said he ominously. And there was peace. "What did ye think ye were after in your dream, Danny?" he added curiously.

Danny winked rapidly and scratched his head. "Faith, I was dr'amin'——"

"I know that well enough, idiot."

"I was dr'amin' I was back in the ingine-room av thot hell-ship, sor, an' Misther Dravos was standin' up to me as man to man."

"What 've ye got against Dravos, ye scut?"

"He was afther tr'atin' me like a naygur, sor—dhrivin' me iv'ry minute av the day——"

"As ye deserved to be driven."

"And insultin' yer honour besides," amended Danny naïvely.

"What——?"

"He was afther sayin' I'd so little intilligince no wan but a madman like yerself would be afther kapin' me in yer employ, sor."

"Oh," commented O'Rourke. He put the railway guide aside, signifying that he was placated for

the time being. "There's a deal in that," he admitted fairly. "I've no doubt the little man could 've skinned ye alive for your stupidity. However . . . What day's this day, Danny?"

Danny thought laboriously. "'Twas this mornin' we lift th' *Ranee*, sor? . . . Thin yestiddy was Wednesday."

"And to-day Thursday, be logical progress of reasoning, eh?"

"Aw, yiss, sor."

"And what's the time?"

Danny consulted O'Rourke's watch on the bureau. "A quarther av twilve."

"Then bestir yourself, ye lazy good-for-nothing, and pack up me things."

"Aw!" cried Danny, expostulant.

"Our train leaves at two. Ye have an hour and a half."

"Aw, but yer honour, is ut no rist at all we'll iver be havin'?"

O'Rourke took up the railway guide and weighed it meditatively, estimating the distance to Danny's head; so that the latter turned hastily and began to gather up his master's belongings with a haphazard hand.

"Ye can rest on the train," continued O'Rourke slightly mollified. "I've just ten days left in which to reach Rangoon, where I've an appointment to keep with a lady, Danny, to wit, Madame

O'Rourke. D'ye mind her, and do ye blame me, Danny?"

Danny became suddenly extraordinarily busy. "Why did ye not say as much to begin with, yer honour?" he complained. "As if I wouldn't work me hands to the stumps av thim . . ."

"'Tis now Thursday noon," continued O'Rourke thoughtfully. "The two o'clock train's scheduled to land us in Calcutta at ten Saturday night. At eight Sunday morning a steamer leaves Diamond Harbour for Rangoon, scheduled for a fair-weather passage of three days. That'll leave us a little leeway, barring accidents. But we've no time to waste."

"But how'll we be catching thot steamer at Di'mind Harbour, sor? How far's that from Calcutta, now, an' will there be thrains at that hour av the night?"

"That's to be dealt with as it turns up, Danny. There's only forty miles between the two places, and if there's no train, we'll charter a motor-car or a boat down the Hughli. . . ."

The latter expedient O'Rourke finally adopted, although he could have afforded a comfortable night in a hotel at Calcutta, had he deemed it wise. But in the fifty-six hours of unmitigated sweltering that he and Danny endured in their flight across India he had leisure to think matters over very carefully, with the result that, all things considered, he felt justified in assuming the world to be in league

against him and in shaping his course accordingly. Therefore it were unwise to permit himself to be seen and recognised in Calcutta, or even to linger on the soil of India an instant longer than absolutely necessary.

Within an hour, then, of his arrival at Howrah, he had, by dint of persistence and rupees, succeeded in hiring a launch to take him from the terminus by water to the steamer at Diamond Harbour—"a moonlight flitting," as he designated the proceeding to Danny, much to the boy's bewilderment.

At the moment the phrase fell from his lips the launch was pluttering noisily down a night-enshrouded reach of the Hughli, some distance below Calcutta. A broad and swollen flood of inky water swept silently with them on either hand, bounded by impenetrable walls of tropical growth, jet black and unrelieved by any touch of light along the river's banks. Ahead there was just simple darkness, nothing more; only behind them a brazen sky overhung the receding city.

Danny looked up to the zenith and back, argumentative, to his master's face.

"There's naught but stars," he said firmly.

"'Tis a moonlight flitting, all the same, ye ignorant spalpeen. To be sure, as ye have acutely observed, there's no moon; but that in itself's an insignificant detail, hardly to be held more than negligible. . . . What's that ye say?"

"Aw, nawthin', yer honour," pleaded Danny plaintively.

"Why not, did ye ask?"

"Aw, shure, sor, I dunno, and I didn't."

"'Tis a moonlight flitting, I'm telling ye, be reason of that full-complexioned and able-bodied sunburst ye insist on sporting instead of a head-piece, Danny; the same being calculated to understudy any moon that happens to be out of the cast any night."

"Aw, yiss," Danny acceded, hastily if vaguely.

"'Tis the outrageous and unlawful colour of the stuff ye call yer hair I'm animadverting against."

"Is ut, now? Aw, shure, an' ut is by way av bein' a thrifle awburn," admitted the valet complacently. "Mesilf wud niver be disphutin' thot, yer honour. But," he insisted, "'tis as black a night as iver I see, wid niver a sign av a moon. So how——"

Here O'Rourke gently but with determination changed the subject.

CHAPTER THIRTY

At a small hour of the morning they made Diamond Harbour in pitch darkness—to which circumstance Danny ostentatiously drew attention—and without misadventure were successful in causing themselves to be transhipped, bag and baggage, to the twin-screw steamship *Poonah*, which vessel rode at anchor in midstream.

Toward eight o'clock of the white-hot forenoon that followed, O'Rourke, in the shadow of a long-boat on the *Poonah's* promenade deck, stood finishing a matutinal cigar and watching narrowly a tender ferry out a final boatload of passengers from the eastern river bank.

Below him the unclean yellow flood swirled and brawled, as if eager to end its journey and cleanse itself in the mother sea that lay sixty miles farther to the south. Beyond the river the Sanderbands reared high their walls of vivid green, shutting off India from the Bay of Bengal. Overhead the skies were pale with heat and dotted with sentinel carrion birds. . . .

Slowly the tender forged toward the steamer's

side; and as it drew near, O'Rourke forgot to smoke and bent over the rail to inspect with unremitting interest those upon its decks. Half-screened as he was he made no pretence of veiling the intensity of the lively and alert glances that he shifted rapidly from face to face. From his expression it might have been thought that he was searching for an expected acquaintance, but never that he apprehended danger, or feared a deadly peril to himself might be embodied in one or another of that heterogenous rabble.

The forward deck of the tender held his regard but briefly; those who waited there, eyeing impassively the towering flanks of the liner, were one and all of the East, of races, creeds and types too numerous to catalogue, as many and as varied as the hues and tints of their garments—jacket, sarong, cummerbund and surtout, turban and tarboosh—that made the decks glow like some odd, floating, faded flower-bed. These the adventurer might not read, save individually upon personal contact. If trouble was to come from them, collectively or individually, he would not know until the blow had fallen. On the other hand, he might be able to hazard shrewd surmises as to the potential animus inherent in any one of the Europeans who were to be his fellow passengers.

The latter were a mere handful: half a dozen commercial travellers from London, Paris, Berlin, their

avocations evident beyond dispute; a sallow English missionary with his withered wife, sombre figures in the stark sunlight; a red-faced deputy-sub-something-or-other of the Indian Government, complacent in white drill and new pith helmet with a gay puggaree; a lone English girl, and a Frenchman.

The two latter held the Irishman's attention: the girl because, even at a distance, her slim white-clad figure and well-poised head seemed singularly fresh and attractive; the man because—well, because O'Rourke was susceptible to premonitions.

He was a tall man and broad, the Frenchman—well-made, well-groomed, carrying himself with an indefinable air of distinction. His face was rather pale (and therefore notable in that concourse of dark skins), its features strongly modelled, the mouth and chin masked by a neatly trimmed and pointed beard and moustache.

O'Rourke could not have said that he had ever seen the man before; yet there was this and that about him which struck a spark of reminiscence from his memory. A suspicion flashed through his mind which he put aside with disdain, as absurd and far-fetched. On the other hand . . . He knit his brows in puzzlement.

The very fixity of his regard drew the eyes of its object upwards. They encountered O'Rourke's, lingered briefly in an unveiled, inquiring stare in which there was not to be detected the least hint of

recognition, and passed onward casually, indifferently, ignoring the impertinence.

By this time deck-hands were making the tender fast to its overshadowing sister, bringing the man and the girl directly underneath O'Rourke—or almost so. He could overhear them conversing indifferently on indifferent topics. The man was speaking French with the glib Parisian enunciation, the girl as fluently, but with an inflection betraying her nationality unmistakably. She was unquestionably English, from her white-canvas shoes to her straw hat with its green film of veiling, while her assured demeanour and dispassionate acceptance of her surroundings led O'Rourke instantly to class her as no stranger to the East. Most probably, he thought, she would turn out to be the daughter of some British official. She was certainly very pretty.

She chattered on with the well-bred vivacity of her caste, attention centred on her companion; he replied less readily, perhaps, and seemed a trifle diverted by contemplation of the *Poonah* and the native rabble. His eyes, black and blank as buttons, travelled hither and yon incessantly. After a bit he looked back to O'Rourke, again became aware of his existence, and lifted his thick and arched black brows in semi-surprise at the steady scrutiny to which he found himself subjected.

The tender's passengers began to stumble up the gang-plank to a lower deck of the liner; and

O'Rourke, with a sober face, went below, taking some care to avoid contact with the incoming crowd.

He found Danny was in his stateroom, engaged with some details of repair to the adventurer's wardrobe. But his ears had been quick to recognise the ring of his master's heels in the gangway, and he had the bolt half drawn when O'Rourke tapped the panels with a peculiar triple knock.

When he had entered, Danny without question returned to his employment. He was only human, however, and plentifully endowed with the human trait of curiosity. He was quick, then, to cock an intelligent blue eye up at his master's countenance, and not at all slow to observe thereupon disturbing portents: a notably set expression about the wide-lipped mouth, an ominous flicker in the depths of thoughtful eyes, a V-mark of perturbation deep between the eyebrows.

Seeing all this, Danny whistled long and low—indeed, inaudibly. "The Saints presarve us!" said he to himself. "But there's the divvle to pay, or I dunno the O'Rourke at all."

O'Rourke remained for a brief space standing in the middle of the cabin, visibly abstracted. Then abruptly some whimsical consideration seemed to resolve his dubiety—as lightning will clear sultry, brooding air; a smile deepened the corners of his mouth, the flicker in his eye merged magically into

a twinkle, the shrug of his broad shoulders conveyed an impression of casting care to the winds.

Which was precisely what he was not doing. He was simply determined temporarily to make the best of what might turn out to be a very serious matter. His philosophy knew nothing so discouraging to ill luck as a smiling welcome.

"Danny, lad," he remarked reflectively, throwing himself ungracefully upon the cushioned transom opposite to his berth. "Danny, ye wouldn't lie to me, would ye now?"

"Aw-w!" reproved Danny. "Shure, yer honour knows ut isn't in me at all." And to himself: "Phat the divvle *now?*"

"Then tell me, Danny, truthfully; did ye ever see a ghost?"

"Aw-w!"—seeing cause to take the query as a joke.

"A ghost that had grown beard since it had become a ghost, Danny?"

"Aw-aw-w!"—still willing to be amused, if "himself" chose to be facetious.

"Because," continued O'Rourke with a slight frown, "I have, and that not five minutes since."

"*Aw?*"

"Wance I left a man for dead, Danny, with a clean sword-thrust through the body of him—a misbegotten blackguard he was; but I killed him in fair fight, sword to sword, and no favour. . . .

'And this bright and beautiful morning, lo and behold ye! who should come tripping up the gangplank but his ghost, as lively as ye please, and with a neat new beard!"

"Aw-w?"—incredulously.

O'Rourke frowned impatiently. "Des Trebes," he explained.

"Aw——"

"Stop it, ye parrot! Stop it, I say! Have ye no word in the dark lexicon of your ignorance other than 'Aw-aw'? Did I hire ye to talk like a hen when meself condescends to have speech with ye? What the divvle d'ye mean be it? Easy there!"—as Danny opened a startled mouth with the patent intention of delivering himself of a protesting "aw." "Careful, ye scut! One more cluck and out ye go, through the port into the broad and ugly Hughli, Danny, to give some hungry crocodile the indigestion. . . . There! Get up, ye omadhaun, and take me respects to the purser and ask him please will he show ye the passenger-list."

The valet left with circumspect alacrity.

Alone, O'Rourke rose and turned thoughtfully to a revolver that made a conspicuous black spot on the white counterpane of the berth, with nervous, strong fingers unlimbering the weapon and taking account of the brass dials of the cartridges that nestled snug in its six-chambered cylinder. The machine was in perfect condition; O'Rourke snapped

the breech shut and thrust it in his pocket. Then he sat down to think, subconsciously aware from noises without that the tender had swung off and the anchor was being tripped.

Could the resemblance be accidental? It seemed hardly possible. The Des Trebes he had known had been a type distinct, so clear and aloof from the general Frenchman that not even the addition of a beard to his physiognomy could have proven a thorough disguise. And it seemed reasonable enough to assume that, Mrs. Prynne having failed in her undertaking, Des Trebes would resume his office as active head of their conspiracy. If it were indeed he whom O'Rourke had just seen, there was every chance imaginable that the final chapter in the history of the Irishman's connection with the Pool of Flame would prove an eventful one.

"Maybe not," admitted O'Rourke, "maybe I deceive meself. But I'm persuaded I'll do well to keep both me eyes open until the day I'm rid of the damned thing!"

At this juncture Danny's knock took him to the door. "Mongsere Raoul de Hyeres," announced the valet breathlessly: "'tis thot the purser says his name is, yer honour."

"Yes," assented O'Rourke dubiously. "But perhaps the purser's mistaken—misinformed."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

As time went on, however, if his uneasiness were not sensibly diminished, nothing happened, the voyage proving entirely uneventful; and O'Rourke was forced to the conclusion that, if Monsieur de Hyeres were really the Vicomte des Trebes, he was strangely content to play a waiting game.

The Irishman, however, had known stranger things than that one man should seem the counterpart of another. And by nothing more than this questionable accident of resemblance did De Hyeres give him reason to believe him anything but what he claimed to be. The man's demeanour was consistently discreet and self-contained; he moved about the ship openly and without any apparent attempt to pry upon the doings of the adventurer, whom he fell into the easy ship-board way of greeting amiably but coolly. Only in one instance, indeed, did they exchange more than but courteous salutations, and then De Hyeres himself seemed to seek the interview, approaching O'Rourke directly.

This was at night, when O'Rourke occupied a chair on the leeward side of the saloon deck, consuming a meditative after-dinner cigar. De Hyeres

stepped out of the companionway, glanced swiftly this way and that, and sauntered toward the Irishman with an unlighted cigarette held conspicuously between his fingers.

O'Rourke likewise surveyed his surroundings in two brief glances: and was contented to find that they were alone, or as much alone as two can be upon a steamship. For they were, after all, well matched; and one of them he knew to be armed. Shifting in his chair so that his revolver lay convenient to his hand, as De Hyeres approached the Irishman removed his cigar from between his teeth, flicked away an inch of ash and silently proffered it in the prescribed fashion.

The Frenchman accepted the courtesy with a bow, applied the fire to his cigarette, inhaled deeply and returned the cigar with a formal phrase of thanks. He lingered for a moment, puffing and gazing off over the black, starlit expanse of the Bay of Bengal, lonely to its dim and far horizon, then observed quietly: "I am not mistaken, I believe, in understanding I have the honour to address Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke, Chevalier of the Legion of Honour?"

"You are not mistaken, monsieur," returned O'Rourke pleasantly, then with the directness which he sometimes found useful, watching the man closely as he spoke: "And I believe it is my pleasure to recognise Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes?"

"Des Trebes, monsieur?" The Frenchman's look of wonder was beyond criticism and there was no least trace of discomfiture to be detected in his manner. "But no. You are under a mistake. I am merely a French gentleman without a title; Raoul de Hyeres is my name."

"Ah!" said the wanderer. "'Twas the resemblance misled me. Pardon, monsieur."

"Granted, my dear sir. . . . Des Trebes? The name has a familiar sound. Do I not remember reading somewhere that the Vicomte des Trebes died last spring? In Tunis, was it? . . . Suddenly, I believe."

"Is it so?" said O'Rourke drily. "Possibly. The vicomte lived in the manner of those who meet with sudden deaths."

The subject languished, and after a few more noncommittal observances De Hyeres wandered off, presumbably in search of the English girl, to whom he had been paying assiduous attention.

On closer scrutiny, she had proved to be a remarkably pretty girl; although, in point of fact, O'Rourke, for all that he admired her looks immensely, had purposely avoided her. This he did from motives of prudence; he mistrusted the combination formed by De Hyeres and the girl. The latter might be all that she looked and claimed to be: a sweet, wholesome and rather ingenuous young Englishwoman, an orphan, resident in Rangoon in

the household of an uncle, to whom she was returning after a visit with friends in Simla. On the passenger list her name stood as Emilia Pynsent. But the adventurer felt it the course of wisdom to deny himself the pleasure of her acquaintance, so long as she permitted the attentions of the Frenchman.

Altogether, considering the hot weather and such self-imposed restrictions, O'Rourke considered the voyage hardly a success from a social point of view. He kept pretty much to himself and to Danny, and to make assurance doubly sure he instituted a new régime with regard to the Pool of Flame: that jewel never left his stateroom. When O'Rourke was on deck or at meals, Danny sat behind bolts, alert and under arms, and *vice versa*. By night they stood regular watches together, the one on guard while the other slept. Clearly the adventurer was determined that no lack of safeguards on his part should again deprive him of the ruby.

But it's no easy matter to avoid meeting any particular person on a ship with a small saloon list, unless one is willing to be purposely rude and discourteous. For all his wariness the Irishman was to carry with him a personal impression of Miss Pynsent.

On the last day of the passage, toward evening, the *Poonah* raised the coast of Burmah; by dark she

was steaming steadily southwards along the littoral, heading for the delta of the Irrawaddy.

A still, bright night with little wind: O'Rourke was not one to resist its allure. Four bells saw him lounging at the rail below the bridge, staring hungrily over toward the land. It was in his mind that another twelve hours or so would see him relieved of his trust; and as the time drew nigh impatience burned hotly within him; he had become full weary of the Pool of Flame and was anxious to be free of the thing, to have its chapter in his history closed forever.

Far over the water a white and flashing light lifted up and caught his eye, a nameless beacon bright against the darkness at the base of the Arakan hills, guardian of the perils of those shallow seas. And simultaneously he became conscious of a presence at his elbow; as he turned sharply the English girl addressed him in a voice sweet-toned and quiet.

"What is that light, if you please, Colonel O'Rourke?"

"Faith, that I can't say, Miss Pynsent."

Her eyes flashed a laugh upon him in the gloom. "Then you know my name?"

"Even as yourself knew mine. 'Twould be strange otherwise, with our ship's company so small."

"But I," she returned, animated, "am such an

insignificant person—while you are the Colonel O'Rourke."

"Ye do me an honour I'm not deserving, Miss Pynsent, but 'tis proud I am entirely that a humble soldier of fortune should be known to ye be reputation."

"Oh, I've grown quite weary of your fame, Colonel O'Rourke," she countered with a trace of laughing impudence. "Hardly anything has interested Monsieur de Hyeres, these past few days, save anecdotes of your exploits."

"'Tis kind of him, to be sure. I must cultivate his acquaintance and learn from him to know meself, I see."

If she detected the irony she overlooked or failed to understand it. "He's very entertaining," she commented pleasantly. "But then most Frenchmen are, don't you think? I hope to see much of him in Rangoon."

"So he's landing there, too?" O'Rourke filled in the pause.

"I believe so. And you, Colonel O'Rourke?"

"I may have to wait over until the next steamer," he admitted warily.

"I sympathise heartily with your disgust at the prospect," laughed the girl.

"Eh? And why? 'Tis a land of fair repute, for climate and beauty."

"Ah, but I live in Burmah, you see, and so have

come to know it far too well. But that's the way with all expatriates, isn't it—to hate their homes so far from Home?"

"Must ye endure it, then, Miss Pynsent?"

"An orphan has little choice. It seems my kismet to abide in Rangoon forever and a day. You see, my only living relative is an uncle, Mr. Lansdowne Sypher, and he's got no one else to keep house for him."

"Lansdowne Sypher . . . !"

The ejaculation sprang to O'Rourke's lips before he could restrain it.

"Yes. Do you know him? He's the junior, you know, of the firm of Secretan and Sypher."

"Solicitors, are they not? . . . No; 'tis me misfortune not to know your uncle. But the name of his firm I've heard."

The genial nature of the Irishman, which had insensibly warmed to the girl's charm, withdrew abruptly, tortoise-like, into a shell of reserve. The element of coincidence had again entered into his affairs, and he had learned a bitter lesson from experience—to distrust coincidence on general principles. "There's naught so common in life as coincidence," he philosophised, "and be the same token naught so dangerous."

For which reason he invented an early excuse to terminate the conversation, and ungallantly withdrew to the seclusion of his stateroom, where he

passed a night that seemed interminable; for he lay long in a wakeful panic of the imagination, scheming out a hundred stratagems whereby he might confuse as many possible attempts to prevent the due and safe delivery of the Pool of Flame into the hands of Mr. Lansdowne Sypher.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

TOWARD the close of the following day the *Poonah* dropped anchor in the river roadstead off Rangoon; and within the ensuing hour her passengers had deserted her, De Hyeres and Miss Pynsent in their van, O'Rourke among the last to leave. And nothing hindered him, not the least hitch delayed his disembarkation. It was curious, it was incredible, it was disturbing. He took away with him no ease of mind whatever.

"The course of good luck never did run smooth," he assured himself gloomily. "At least, that's me own experience. The sun never shines so bright as the minute before I stumble over the unexpected and fall flat on me foolish face. Now if only it were stormy—if only De Hyeres, or Des Trebes or somebody had slipped a dynamite bomb into me pocket, I'd feel more hopeful. But, Heavens!"—he rapped sharply the gunwale of the sampan in which he was journeying shorewards—"knock wood before the sky falls, me boy. 'Twould be only natural were this cockleshell to turn turtle in midstream—and then meself would sink like a shot, with this infernal Jonah hanging round me neck!"

There seemed more than a possibility of that; the particular sampan which had fallen to his lot was apparently no more substantial, no less cranky than its kin. It seemed to dance across the rushing tide of Rangoon river as lightly and with quite as much stability as a feather, every wavelet a peril, the swell from a passing bumboat a dangerous menace. . . . O'Rourke at length rose, balanced himself gingerly, with a convulsive leap found himself upon the landing stage below the floating jetty, and took away with him a high opinion of the skill of Burmese watermen.

There were tikkagharries waiting, and without a breath's delay the adventurer and his servant climbed into the nearest and desired to be conveyed to the offices of Messrs. Secretan and Sypher. The vehicle whirled them swiftly away and into the main-travelled way of Rangoon, Mogul Street; whose romantic designation rouses anticipations inevitably disappointed, since it is anything but Burmese in character, offering to eyes acquainted with the street scenes of Indian cities nothing new. O'Rourke declared it might have been a bit of Bombay or of Madras transplanted; of Burmah, the individual land, there was little visible—little more than the natives who formed anything but a large part of the wayfaring throng. He found in Mogul Street, the commercial centre of Rangoon, architects as well as architecture alien to the land. . . . But

there were compensating things: glimpses caught in passage of narrow side streets, teeming with life; the warm, scented atmosphere of the city; the glowing colour and the repose inseparable from any conception of an Eastern city; above all the slim, graceful spire of the Shway Dagon, a finger of gold pointing the way to Heaven. . . .

In front of a structure of stone and iron so palpably an office-building that it might bodily have been transplanted to the Strand without exciting comment—save for the spotless cleanliness of it—their tikkagharry drew up. The gharriwallah indicated the offices of Messrs. Secretan and Sypher, one flight up—and named his fare. O'Rourke paid him and alighted, with Danny at his heels and his heart trying to choke him. The hour of fulfilment was at hand—and all was well! He who had faced death in a hundred shapes of terror, unflinching, found himself in a flutter of nerves that would have disgraced a schoolgirl. He would not have considered it surprising had he been shot down then and there, in broad daylight, by some skulking assassin. He apprehended he knew not what: danger, death, despoilment of his treasure—from every quarter. Every footfall was ominous in his ears, every spoken word a shriek of warning.

He dodged into the building, took the steps three at a stride . . . and suddenly found himself in the presence of, more than that, closeted with, the

man to meet whom he had crossed half the world at peril of his life: Mr. Lansdowne Sypher. He eyed him in astonishment unbounded, questioning his reality. Conscious of what he had dared and triumphed over within the last three months, to find himself in that spot dazed him.

And yet the solicitor was tangible enough; the touch of his hand was still warm in O'Rourke's palm; while their seclusion was undeniable and Danny remained in the outer office, a stout-hearted, loyal, armed and efficient guard against interruption.

"Colonel O'Rourke?" Sypher's manner was very cordial. "I'm glad to see you. You are within your time, yet I had begun to despair of you. Be seated." He indicated a chair beside his desk. "And permit me; you of all men will appreciate the precaution."

He laughed and went to the windows, adjusting the wooden shades in such a manner that the light was tempered and no portion of the room could be visible to any one spying from a window in one of the adjacent buildings. Then he turned and smiled cheerfully at the stupefied adventurer. O'Rourke comprehended him slowly: a little man of brisk habits, full-coloured, his hair touched with grey, wearing the indescribable manner of the Anglo-Saxon exile; unquestionably an Englishman, a gentleman, a man of ability.

"Ye are Mr. Sypher?" The Irishman got his

bearings gradually and cautiously. "'Tis surprising—somewhat—your reception. I trust ye'll pardon me showing it. I didn't understand ye were expecting me."

"And why not?" Sypher rocked back in his desk-chair. "Certainly I should be justified in assuming that my letter must eventually have reached a gentleman of reputation as international as your own."

"True for ye," O'Rourke agreed, not without a certain simple dignity in permitting the flattery to pass unchallenged. "But . . . there's been an interval of some months between me receipt of your communication and me appearance here. If I were to tell ye what's happened to me in the meantime, ye'd understand something of me emotions just now. . . . Faith, 'tis meself wouldn't bet ye or anyone else a penny on the proposition that I'm really here at last."

"I don't doubt that." Sypher eyed him with undisguised interest. "It's something I promise myself you'll be kind enough to tell me—later. At present—the business day is closing." He paused significantly.

O'Rourke nodded. "I have it here," said he; "safe be the mercy of several highly potential saints!" He laughed uneasily, fumbling in his breast-pocket. "There it is," said he, tossing the stone in its chamois covering upon the solicitor's desk.

Sypher himself betrayed some evidences of nervousness as he sat forward and lifted the case by its leathern thongs. He let it dangle before him for an instant, watching it with a curious, speculative smile. . . . "Well," he said, "really . . . !" And after a pause: "I congratulate you, Colonel O'Rourke. And I admire you immensely. . . . You see, when this commission was offered us, I considered seriously the project of going in search of you in person and bringing the stone back to Rangoon myself. But then—although I'm not really a timorous man—I knew the circumstances so well—I feared I should never reach Rangoon alive. Yes." He thrust a hand into his waistcoat pocket and produced a penknife, with which he began to slit the stitches that enclosed the ruby. "You've been wondering, no doubt, why so enormous a reward was offered. . . ."

"I have that," assented O'Rourke.

"It was partly because of the danger," said Sypher, intent upon his occupation. "You know, these Burmese are a curiously pious folk; when one of them grows rich he employs the major part of his fortune in building a temple—or in some such work. This particular gentleman—a very wealthy merchant—chose to give half of what he had to the restoration of the Pool of Flame to the Buddha from which it was originally stolen. But he, too, was afraid. He's superstitious about the stone—

believes it bad luck to touch it so long as it remains away from its Buddha. So he came to us. . . . I myself am not superstitious, but . . ."

He ceased to speak abruptly, for the Pool of Flame lay naked, a blinding marvel, in the hollow of his palm. O'Rourke heard him gasp and was conscious of his hastened respiration. Watching the man intently, he saw a strange shade of pallor colour his face.

"'Tis meself," said the adventurer, "that's no more superstitious than ye, sir. Yet I'm willing to confess I'm glad the thing's out of me hands at last."

Sypher seemed to recollect himself as one coming out of a state of stupor. He stood up and buttoned the ruby carefully into a pocket of his trousers. "Come," he said crisply. "Let us step across the street to the bank. The money's there for you, sir —the reward."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Back in his stateroom on the *Poonah*, O'Rourke threw himself into the lower berth and there lay, a forearm flung across his eyes, thinking excitedly, disturbed by formless forebodings.

Beside him Danny was packing industriously, with now and again a pause during which he would stand reflective, his gaze fixed upon his employer's face, a little puzzled and perplexed.

The *Poonah* was pausing overnight to discharge and take aboard cargo; for this reason O'Rourke in his haste to get ashore had not delayed to take his luggage with him. . . . On deck, fore and aft, donkey-engines were puffing and chugging and chain tackles rattling as they lifted freight to and from the hold and the lighters alongside.

Abruptly, without moving, O'Rourke spoke. "I'll want evening clothes, Danny," said he. "'Tis dining I am to-night with Mr. Straker and his niece, Miss Pynsent, who came with us from Diamond Harbour. 'Twill save a bit of bother to dress before I go ashore."

"Aw-w," said Danny, assimilating. . . . "And

the Missus?" he said suddenly, some minutes later; "M'anin' Madam O'Rourke, sor. Did ye get no word from her?"

"For what else would I be driving to every hotel in the town after leaving Mr. Sypher, Danny, but to inquire for her? She's not here; but she'll come, be sure. She's still got several days—three or four—in which to keep our tryst. 'Tis discontented I am not to find her waiting for me, but I'm satisfied entirely she'll keep faith."

"And," insisted Danny eagerly—"beggin' yer honour's pardon—but what will ye have to tell her, sor?"

O'Rourke sat up. "Have to tell her? What d'ye mean?"

"I mean, sor, I'm dyin' wid the wish to know how ut's all turned out. Plase, yer honour, won't ye be tellin' me? Is ut—is ut all right?"

"Bless your heart, Danny!" laughed O'Rourke. "'Tis so dazed I've been that I never thought to tell ye—thinking all the time that ye knew. 'Tis all right indeed, me boy. The Pool of Flame's in Mr. Sypher's keeping and the money's in mine—in the bank, Danny, payable to me order. Think of it—one hundred thousand pounds of real money, and all me own. 'Tis ridiculous, 'tis absurd. 'Tis meself hardly credits the truth of it all; yet I was there—saw the man, gave him the jewel, went to the bank with him and for the space of five min-

utes sat at a table, with all that money before me—counting it over, bill by bill, a square hundred of them, each for a thousand pounds, guaranteed by the Bank of England! . . . Think of that—all that belonging to me—to me, O'Rourke! . . ."

"Thank God!" breathed Danny devoutly. "But did ye l'arn nothin' about the stone?"

"Little enough Danny—only a part of the meaning of the whole divilish business; the rest I'm to know to-night. Mr. Sypher 'll be telling me after we've dined; he wants to hear me own end of the story, too. . . . Hand me those shoes—no, idiot, the button ones. I must be hurrying, not to be late. 'Tis a surprise the man's promised me—'and the reverse of unpleasant,' said he. I'd like to know what that can be. . . ."

He stood up and scrambled into the shirt Danny held for him, but while fumbling with the studs, fell again into a thoughtful and troubled humour.

"I can't believe 'tis all come true," he averred soberly. "'Tis wholly out of reason and insane; be rights this business should have wound up in a fracas the like of which neither you nor myself has ever known. This peace passes me understanding altogether; 'tis unnatural, like the calm before a storm. I'm mistrustful of it; I fear 'tis early yet for us to be congratulating ourselves on having the Pool of Flame off our hands for good and all. Mark me words, Danny. . . ."

"And what'll them be?" asked Danny, open-mouthed.

"There's a storm brewing," said O'Rourke with conviction.

"The Saints forbid!" murmured Danny piously.

Sypher had very explicitly named his dinner-hour, after the formal English fashion, nowhere and by nobody more rigidly observed than by the Englishman in the Orient; "eight for eight-thirty," he had said. And as O'Rourke, a very dignified and imposing O'Rourke in his evening dress, waited for a sampan on the lower grating of the *Poonah's* passenger gangway he had a round three-quarters of an hour for leeway—ample leisure for an interested inspection of that part of Rangoon lying between the floating jetty and Sypher's residence in a suburb near Dalhousie Park.

Danny remained aboard ship only temporarily, being instructed to follow with O'Rourke's belongings to suitable accommodations already engaged at a hotel on the Strand, overlooking the roadstead; from whose windows O'Rourke was promising himself the pleasure of watching the arrival of the steamship bearing his wife to his arms.

"Bless her dear face!" said he softly. "'Tis meself will be desolated if she's not aboard that Messageries boat due to-morrow—now that I can go back to her, a man of property, no longer a pauper ne'er-do-well! Think of that, ye lucky dog!"

A sampan slid noiselessly in beside the grating. O'Rourke let himself cautiously into it and incontinently collapsed upon the rear seat as the boat slid away toward the shore lights, yielding to the vigorous sweeps of the single long oar wielded by the Burman in the bows.

Here and there overhead thin and ragged shreds of cloud blurred the brilliance of the sky. Between the Rangoon shore where the city, beneath a haze luminous and golden, pulsed and throbbed with its noisy nocturnal life, to the Dalla side, still and dim behind its barrier lights, the river rolled like a flood of ink, its burnished surface shot with parti-coloured streamers of radiance from jetty beacons and the riding-lights of the night-enshrouded fleet.

Suspended far above the seething city a star hung like a planet in leash, at the peak of the invisible spire of the Shway Dagon.

Down-stream and up, like water-insects, sampans skimmed silently, flitting shadows merging into shadows; low, muted echoes of laughter, like broken chords of gentle music, drifted across the tide. The waters gnawed and growled at the great stark flanks of the vessels beneath whose sterns and before whose prows the sampan swept.

A native river-boat with knife-like stem and towering, stately stern, passed, surging swiftly up against the current, oars dipping and rising in steady, rhythmic splashings, lanternlight disclosing

rows of oarsmen, bare backs glistening like black silk as they bent and recovered.

The day had died in gentle winds, and now by night suave airs breathed down from inland, little breezes heavy laden with a strange, sweet smell, and melancholy, as if conscious that they wafted a multitude of souls of gentle flowers out to the Nirvana of the sea.

"A fair land," commented O'Rourke. "Faith, 'tis meself wonders that men linger in the cold, pale West, when there's all this to be seen, to be felt and known, for the seeking."

Ashore, a tikkagharry caught him up and bore him down the silent road that winds between the Strand and the river's edge, then whipped into Mogul Street, where the fluent tide of life ran broad and deep beneath a glare of light. And for a time the gharriwallah piloted his fare slowly through a concourse of nations: keen, gaunt Chin from the Hills pausing to purchase cherroots from sidewalk stalls attended by partridge-plump Burmese girls; Tommies and kilted Scots elbowing one another, all moderately the worse for drink; Chinese strutting in all the pomp and panoply of their bizarre festal costumes; Sikhs chatting with members of the municipal police; Japanese, silent, furtive, sly and efficient; vendors of a dozen tribes and castes offering their wares of betel-nut, pineapple, cooked foods and tobacco; naked and marvelling natives from the

Southern Provinces; coolies pattering madly between shafts of spidery rickshaws wherein lolled Europeans in evening attire, like O'Rourke bound for their late dinners; Suratis, Karen, Shan princes with their retinues. . . . An epitome of the East: the East indolent, alluring, insolent, that sang in the wanderer's willing ear its age-old, subtle siren-song, wooing him, insinuating itself once again into its niche in his heart, flattering him, winning him with the elusive caress of its fragrant breath. . . .

All too quickly the tikka whisked out of the main channel of the city's life, out beyond the Mohammedan mosque and the Chetti's hall and the Christian chapel, and into the soft, dense night of the countryside—a world of darkness sparsely studded with dim, glowing windows; and all too soon, again, it swung off from the highway into a private drive, crunched over gravel, and stopped before the illuminated veranda of a native bungalow.

O'Rourke got down, discharged the driver and ascended the steps, a little puzzled to find no one waiting to welcome him, whether Sypher, Miss Pynsent, or at worst a servant. Surely he was expected. . . . But nobody appeared. The grating tires of the departing tikkagharry had made noise enough to apprise the household of the arrival of its guest, one would think. Nevertheless, O'Rourke remained ungreeted.

"Grinning with anguish, the man . . . staggered and, throwing back his arm, flung the Pool of Flame from him with all his might"

(*Page* 261)

He stroked his chin, perplexed, wondering if by mischance the native driver had brought him to the wrong bungalow. But it was now too late to call him back and make sure. And this veranda, still and empty as it was, softly lighted by lanterns dependent from its roof, was to him a small oasis in a world of darkness. Without advice he was lost, could find his way no other where. He would have simply to wait until the household came to life, or until by his own efforts he succeeded in quickening it.

He tried to do this latter to the best of his ability by tapping a summons on the door-jamb. Through the wire insect-screens a broad hallway and a staircase rising to the upper floor were visible. Limp, cool-looking rugs conceived in pleasing colour-schemes protected the hardwood flooring. To the right a door stood ajar and permitted a broad shaft of light to escape from the room beyond. On the other hand a similar door, likewise open, showed a dimmer glow. Two other doors were closed; O'Rourke assumed that they led to the kitchen-offices.

Having waited a few moments without event, the Irishman knocked a second time, and would have knocked a third when he thought better of it and glanced at his watch. It was only a matter of ten minutes after eight; strictly interpreting the intent of Sypher's invitation, he was a trifle early. Presumably the servants were all out of earshot, preoccupied with preparations for the meal; while

Sypher and his niece were most probably still dressing.

With an impatient air O'Rourke turned back to the veranda. A hammock in one corner was swinging idly in the breeze. A number of wicker armchairs stood about, invitingly furnished with cushions. O'Rourke selected one and disposed himself to wait.

After five minutes he frowned thoughtfully and lit a cigarette.

When an additional ten minutes had elapsed without a sound being heard in the house, he forgot to be angry, and began to feel uneasy. Something in the deathlike silence of the place proved infinitely disturbing. He got up, stamped heavily to the door and knocked again with no uncertain vigour; and, presently, again and more loudly still.

Behind him the jungle-like gardens round the bungalow were almost imperceptibly astir with whisperings and stealthy rustlings of foliage: the night singing gently in its mystery of the world beyond. . . .

"I don't like it!" O'Rourke exclaimed suddenly. The crisp rattle of the syllables jangled, dissonant in the silence. He had an odd sensation as of being rebuked for some unwarrantable presumption, some lawless trespass upon sacred precincts.

"But it isn't right," he argued in a lower tone.

He put a hand upon the knob of the screen door,

but thought again and turned away; it was not his place to invade the home of a man who was hardly more than a chance acquaintance, no matter how unpleasantly impressed he might be by the circumstances in which he found himself.

"Faith, 'tis a fine surprise he's given me," he said, irresolute. "But it can't be premeditated insult. Why should it be? And they can't all be out. 'Tis sorry I am I let that driver go; more than likely this will be the wrong house entirely. That must be the trouble. I'll just go, quietly fold up me tent and decamp before the inhabitants, if any there be, discover me and run me off the premises."

But at the head of the steps, with foot poised to descend, something restrained him; it would be difficult to say what, unless it were the unbroken, steadfast, uncanny quiet. "I'll have a look," he determined suddenly; "perhaps . . ."

He turned to the right and stopped before a long, open window, looking into what seemed to be a music-room and library combined. Brightly illuminated by hanging lamps of unusual brilliancy, the interior was clearly revealed. And with an abrupt exclamation the adventurer entered, feeling for the revolver, to carry which had of late become habitual with him.

The room was simply furnished, if tastefully. There was a grand piano near the veranda windows

with a music rack and cabinet near by. Dispersed about the floor were a few comfortable chairs, a rug of rare Oriental texture, two consoles adorned with valuable porcelains. In the middle of the room stood a draped centre-table littered with books and magazines; toward the back a long, flat-topped desk. And against the rear wall, ordinarily hidden by a folding screen of Japanese manufacture, now swept aside, was a small steel safe. Upon this O'Rourke's attention was centred. He remarked that it looked new and very strong; it was open, disclosing a variety of pigeonholes more or less occupied by docketed documents. and a smaller interior strong-box.

Between the desk and the safe a man lay prone and quite motionless. He was dressed for a ceremonious dinner, and apparently had been struck down in the act of stepping from his desk to the safe. For beyond all doubt he had been murdered. The haft of a knife protruded from his back, buried to its hilt just beneath his left shoulder-blade.

O'Rourke moved over to the body and lifted it by the shoulders, turning the face to the light. Then, with a low oath, he dropped it.

A small sound, so slight as to be all but indistinguishable, penetrated O'Rourke's stupefaction. He stood erect, looking about, telling himself that the noise resembled as much as anything the hushed cry of a child sobbing in sleep, soft and infinitely

pathetic. Unable to assign its source elsewhere, he at first attributed it to the stricken man at his feet; and in a desperate hope that the pulse of life might still linger in Sypher's body, he knelt, withdrew the knife, turned the corpse upon its back, and laid his ear to its breast, above the heart.

He could not detect a flutter, yet, hoping against hope, he turned back the eyelid and examined the cold staring pupil. With a despairing shake of his head he stood up and cast about for something suitable for the final test, discovering upon the desk a long, thin steel paper-cutter with a brightly polished surface. And kneeling once more, he held the flat of the blade before the pale, parted lips. A moment's experiment was enough; no trace of breath dimmed the lustre of the steel. Beyond dispute, Sypher was dead.

"Poor divvle!" muttered the Irishman. . . . "The Pool of Flame! . . ."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

For several minutes O'Rourke remained beside the body, making two notable discoveries. For he was quick to note the fact that one of the dead man's hands was tightly clenched, while the other lay half-open and limp. The former was closed upon a leather thong so stout as to resist any attempt to break it by main strength, so firmly held that the murderer had found it necessary to sever it with a knife. The knife itself was there, for proof of this; the sheen of light upon its mother-of-pearl handle caught the Irishman's eye.

Picking it up, he subjected it to a close examination that, however, gleaned no information. It was simply a small pocket penknife, little worn, with blades of German steel. It carried no identifying marks and told him but one thing—that the assassin had been a European; a native would never have bothered with so ineffectual a thing when a sturdy weapon, serviceable alike for offence or defence, would have served its purpose equally well.

From this he turned to the dagger which he had taken from the body; a stiletto with a plain ebony

handle, unmarked, unscratched, apparently fresh from the dealer's showcase. It meant nothing, save that it indicated still more strongly that the murderer was most probably not a native. A Greek or an Italian, a Genoese sailor or a native of Southern France—say a seafaring-man out of Marseilles—might have carried it.

"Oho!" said O'Rourke, speculative. "A Frenchman, mayhap!"

He got up, satisfied that he would learn nothing more by continuing his search of the solicitor's body. The mental link between the fact of the crime and its perpetrator was inevitable; O'Rourke believed implicitly that Sypher had been murdered by Des Trebes masquerading as "De Hyeres." And he could have done himself an injury in the impotent fury roused by realisation that he had permitted himself to be so childishly hoodwinked, despite the suspicions he had entertained of the *soi-disant* "De Hyeres." He felt himself responsible, since he had neglected to warn Sypher. It had been on his tongue's tip that afternoon, when Sypher himself had diverted the warning by his request that the O'Rourke could more comfortably spin his yarn after they had dined.

"Poor divvle!" said the adventurer again. He stooped to spread his handkerchief over the staring, pitiful face. "And poor, poor young woman!"

He was startled by the thought of her; for the

first time it entered into his comprehension, until then bounded by the hard and fast fact of the murder. Now instantly his concern about the crime was resolved into solicitude for the girl. What could have happened to her? What had become of the servants, whose sudden desertion had left the house so sinisterly quiet?

Swept on by a fervour of anxiety on the girl's behalf, O'Rourke glanced quickly about the study to assure himself that he had overlooked nothing of importance, then passed out into the main hall or reception-room. Here the most searching inspection revealed nothing amiss. He moved on to the other room on the main floor and found himself in the dining-room; here again all was in perfect order. The pretty, round table in the centre had been carefully set for a party of four and wore an air of expectancy, he thought—of patient waiting to discharge its cordial function. Not a spoon or knife or fork was out of place or missing. Only, the candles in the five-armed silver candelabrum needed snuffing.

The sole illumination of the room, the candles furnished a good light, however, protected as they were from draughts by transparent cylinders of mica; and observing this the wanderer swept away the dainty, trifling silken shades and, catching up the candelabrum itself, bore it with him on his round of investigation.

The kitchen offices in the rear of the house next received his attention; he found them completely untenanted, having apparently been abandoned in desperate haste. Everything was in disorder; the meal he had been invited to partake of was cooking to cinders in pots and ovens; a heavy offence of burning food thickened the atmosphere. Half-stifled, he left the place as quickly as possible, returned to the main hall and ascended to the upper story.

Here he found three bed-chambers and a bath. He first entered Sypher's, then the room evidently occupied by Miss Pynsent, finally what was unquestionably a guest-chamber, discovering nothing noteworthy until he reached the latter. And here he received a shock. Thrown carelessly across the foot of the bed was a woman's evening-wrap, while on the bureau were gloves, long, white and fresh, but wrinkled from recent wear, and a silken veil. Plainly these were the property of the fourth guest, whose place had been set at the table below, but of whose identity he had not been apprised. Presumably, he reflected, she (whoever she was) had been intended as the fulfilment of Sypher's hinted surprise.

A guess formed vaguely in his brain, and suddenly curdled into a suspicion. He took the gloves in his hand, examining them for marks of identification, but found none. But in one corner of the veil he discovered an embroidered initial—the letter B.

"Beatrix?" he guessed huskily. "Is it possible? . . . He promised me a surprise. . . . 'Twould have been like her to plan it with him—and 'tis quite possible she reached Rangoon before I. . . . My wife! . . ."

Hastily he returned to the evening-wrap, a fascinating contrivance of lace and satin unquestionably the last cry of the Parisian mode, such a wrap as his wife might well have worn. But beyond Paquin's label stitched inside its dainty pocket it boasted no distinguishing mark. . . .

He stumbled hurriedly from the room and down the stairs, leaving the candelabrum on a table in the hall and returning to the study where Sypher's body lay; tortured by mounting fears, he stood and looked blankly about him, at a loss where next to turn, if almost preternaturally alive to every sound or sight that might afford him a clue. . . . He fought against a suspicion that crawled like a viper in his brain. Had he, after all, been deceived in Sypher's niece, Miss Pynsent? Had that innocent charm of hers been a thing assumed, a cloak for criminal duplicity? Had she in reality been Des Trebes' accomplice? Had those clear and limpid eyes of youth, all through that voyage been looking forward to such a scene, to such a tragic ending as this? Could she have afforded the Frenchman the aid he needed to consummate his chosen crime?

For he was now ready to believe Des Trebes the

prime mover in this terrible affair; he no longer entertained a shred of doubt that his enemy had travelled with him from Calcutta under the disguise of "De Hyeres." And he believed the man had planned this thing far ahead; else would he have surely taken some overt steps to prevent O'Rourke from delivering the ruby to Sypher. He divined acutely that, despairing of any further attempt to win the jewel from him, Des Trebes had turned his wits to the task of stealing it from Sypher: somebody naturally much less to be feared than the adventurer.

But on the other hand, if the girl had not been Des Trebes' assistant—what had become of her? And what of her guest—the lady one of whose initials was B?

It was not inconsistent with Des Trebes' wholehearted villainy that he should employ a gang of thugs sufficiently large to overpower and make away with bodily and in a body Miss Pynsent, her guest and the servants. . . . "Great God!" cried O'Rourke. "If it be in truth my wife——!"

Without presage a thin but imperative tintinnabulation broke upon the silence of the house of death. O'Rourke jumped as if shot. Somewhere in one of the other rooms a telephone-bell was ringing. It ceased, leaving a strident stillness; but before he could move to find the instrument and answer the call, there rose a second time that moaning sob

which first he had attributed to an impossible source, then, in the turmoil of his thoughts, had forgotten.

He waited, listening intently. The telephone called again and again subsided. Then a third time he heard the groan, more faint than before, but sufficiently loud to suggest its source. He moved warily toward the windows and out upon the veranda—hounded by the telephone. But that would have to wait; here was a more urgent matter to his hand. Between the long insistent rings the groaning was again audible; and this time he located it accurately. It came from the lawn, near the edge of the veranda. He stepped off carefully, but almost stumbled over the body of a man who lay there, huddled and moaning.

"And another!" whispered the adventurer, awed. "Faith, this Pool of Flame . . .!"

He was at once completely horrified and utterly dumbfounded. Nothing he had come upon within the bungalow seemed to indicate that there had been anything in the nature of a struggle prior to the assassination of Sypher. He had up to this moment considered it nothing but a cold-blooded and cowardly murder; the man had apparently been struck down from behind in total ignorance of his danger. O'Rourke had deduced that Sypher had risen from the desk to put the jewel in his safe; and that while he was so engaged the assassin, till then skulking outside the long windows and waiting for

a moment when his victim's back should be turned, had entered and struck. . . . But how could he reconcile that hypothesis with this man who lay weltering and at the point of death at the veranda's edge?

Indeed, he could not do so. But this victim, at least, was not yet dead; if he had strength to moan, he might yet be revived, at least temporarily.

Without delay, then, the Irishman grasped the man beneath his armpits, and, lifting him bodily to the veranda, dragged him into the library. Not until he had placed him in the middle of the floor, beneath the glare of lamplight, did O'Rourke have an opportunity to observe his features. But now as he dropped to his knees beside the body, his wondering cry testified to immediate recognition.

The latest name to be inscribed on the long and blood-stained death-roll of the Pool of Flame was that of Paul Maurice, Vicomte des Trebes; or, if there were life enough left in the man to enable him to insist upon his *nom de guerre* (the wanderer reflected grimly) Raoul de Hyeres.

"What next?" wondered O'Rourke. "What can the meaning of it all be now?"

With each development the mystery was assuming more fantastic proportions, becoming still more impenetrable and unsolvable. But he had no leisure in which to ponder it now, if Des Trebes were to be restored. And O'Rourke worked over the man as

tenderly as though they had been lifelong friends, with skilful fingers estimating the nature and extent of his wounds, with sound knowledge of rough and ready surgery doing all that could be done to bring him back to consciousness.

Only the faintest of respirations moved the Frenchman's breast; to all other appearance he was lifeless, indisputably beyond salvation. His body was a mass of wounds; in the torso alone O'Rourke found no less than eleven knife-thrusts, and these all in spots normally mortal. That he retained the least glimmer of the vital spark seemed miraculous.

Remembering that he had remarked water and wine on the dining-room buffet, O'Rourke went hastily thither, returning with a carafe of the former and a half-bottle of brandy. With these judiciously applied, it was still a matter of some ten minutes ere he succeeded in quickening to a feeble blaze the dying embers of vitality. Then at last Des Trebes sighed feebly; a spot of colour, febrile, fickle, evanescent, dyed his cheeks; his breath rattled harshly in his gullet; his eyelids twitched and opened wide. He glared blankly at the face above.

"Des Trebes!" cried O'Rourke. "Des Trebes!"

His voice quickened the intelligence of that moribund brain. A flash of recognition lighted the staring eyes. The lips moved without sound.

"Des Trebes!"

"*Ah, yes . . . the Irishman . . .*"

The whisper was barely articulate.

O'Rourke put to his lips a cup of brandy diluted with a little water. "Drink," he pleaded, "and try to tell me what's happened to ye. Who gave ye these wounds? Try to speak."

"*But . . . no . . . I shall not tell.*"

"But—good God, man! ye've been murdered!"

The white lips moved again; the adventurer bent his ear low to them.

"*We . . . have both . . . lost . . . but you . . . your wife . . .*"

"*My wife!*"

In a frenzy O'Rourke resumed his efforts to strengthen the dying man with spirits and water, but Des Trebes, with a final effort, obstinately shut his teeth, moving his head imperceptibly from side to side in token of his stubborn refusal.

So he died, implacable. In his pale cheeks the flush ebbed, leaving them leaden; in his eyes the light faded; in his mortal agony they became glazed; his limbs grew rigid and the death sweat stood out on his pallid forehead and hollow temples. A violent tremor shook him like a reed in the wind. And then he lay cold and still, malignant and lustreless eyes still staring fixedly at the face of him whom Des Trebes of his own accord had chosen for his mortal enemy. In death the chiselled features remained set in a smile sardonic and triumphant. Dying, he gave no comfort to his foe. . . .

For a little time longer O'Rourke knelt at Des Trebes' side, watching and wondering. Eventually he sighed heavily, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and rose. And, rising, he perceived for the first time that he was no longer alone with the dead in that place.

Kneeling in silence by the vicomte's side he had till then been hidden from the inner doorway to the room by the drapery of the centre-table. And evidently it was this circumstance which had emboldened a man to slip in from the main hall and approach Sypher's desk at the back of the room.

As O'Rourke appeared he was conscious first of something moving in the room—a movement caught vaguely from the corners of his eyes. Then he heard a stifled cry of fright. He had already his revolver in his hand, so instant had been the obedience of his brain and body to the admonition of instinct.

He swung about with the weapon poised, crying: "Stop!" The other man was apparently trying to escape by the door to the hall, but was much too far from it to escape the threatened bullet. A jet of fire spurted from his hand. O'Rourke heard a crash and clatter of broken window-glass behind him. Without delay or conscious aim he fired and saw, still indistinctly through pungent wreaths of smoke, the figure reel and collapse upon itself.

The man had hardly fallen ere O'Rourke stood over him, with a foot firm upon one arm, while he

bent and wrenched a revolver from relaxing fingers. Then, stepping back, he took stock of the murderous-minded intruder, and saw at his feet, writhing, coughing and spitting, a Chinese coolie—a type of the lowest class, his face a set yellow mask, stolid, unemotional, brutalised. Even then it betrayed little feeling; only the slant-set black eyes burned with unquenchable hatred as they glared up at the conqueror. . . . O'Rourke's bullet had penetrated the man's chest; and as he squirmed and groaned through his sharpened teeth of a rat, a crimson stain spread on the bosom of his coarse white blouse.

Wholly confounded, O'Rourke shook an amazed head. A third element had been added to the mystery with no effect other than to render it more opaque and dense than before. And he was unable even to question the fellow, for he himself knew no Pidgin English, and even should he find a way to reach that low intelligence its possessor would probably refuse any information.

With a hopeless, baffled gesture, the adventurer turned away, debating his next move. The telephone, its raucous voice now long since stilled, came into his mind, and he was minded to leave the room and find it, to summon aid.

Before he could move, however, a footfall on the veranda startled him, and his ears were ringing with a command couched in terse, curt English:

"Hands up!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

A MAN stood in one of the windows, his figure conspicuous against the night in cool white linen of a semi-military cut, his extended right hand training a revolver on the Irishman's head.

"Faith!" cried O'Rourke with genuine relief, "you're more welcome than a snowfall in Hades. Good evening to ye, and many of them."

"Hands up!"

"With all the pleasure in the world." O'Rourke elevated his hands. "I've two revolvers on me person," he volunteered amiably; "before ye go any further ye'll be wanting to take 'em away from me, I'm not doubting."

"From what I see, I quite believe I shall," agreed the Englishman, without relaxing his unprejudiced attitude. "At all events, keep your hands where they are, for the time being. . . . What the deuce does this mean?"

"Tell me yourself and I'll make ye a handsome present," returned O'Rourke composedly. "I've been addling me wits over it for the last thirty minutes, but neither rhyme nor reason can I read into

it. But, see now: would ye mind relieving me of the arsenal I've been telling ye about, that I may rest me arms without fear of being punctured? "

The other laughed shortly and entered the room —a clean-limbed, sturdy, well set-up boy of four- or five-and-twenty or thereabouts. He possessed, aside from an emphatic and capable manner, good looks enhanced by a wide, good-humoured mouth. His eyes at the moment were professionally cold and alert, rapidly inventorying the room. O'Rourke was prepossessed by him at sight.

" You might help me out a bit, you know," said the boy briskly. " You've been so free with your information that I don't doubt you will place me still further under obligation to you by turning your back and depositing your weapons on that table. Of course, I needn't bore you by remarks upon the folly of false moves."

" 'Twould be quite superfluous," replied O'Rourke, obeying with a fair and easy grace. " There now. What else may be your pleasure? "

" Move back three paces and stand still."

" Right-O, me lord."

O'Rourke executed the prescribed evolution and, at rest, heard footsteps behind him; a thought later he felt the Englishman's hands rapidly going through his pockets. Then, with a " very good," the latter stepped between the table and O'Rourke and faced him.

"You've apparently told the truth thus far," he said. "Now what d'you know about this?" He waved a hand round the room. "Be careful what you say. I may as well inform you I'm Couch —lieutenant—sub-chief of police for this district."

"Saint Patrick would be no more welcome," declared O'Rourke. "I was on the point of trying to get ye by telephone when ye saved me the trouble. How the divvle did ye happen to drop in so opportunely?"

"I was coming up-stream in the police launch, on the night tour of inspection, and stopped at the landing just below this—the grounds here run down to the river, you know—to telephone back to headquarters on business. The exchange operator suggested I look in here and see if everything was all right—said he'd been unable to get any response since nightfall. . . . Now?"

Carefully and concisely O'Rourke wove the events of the day into a straight narrative, starting with the delivery to Sypher of the Pool of Flame, touching briefly upon Des Trebes' part—so far as he understood it—and concluding with the death of the coolie. The sub-chief of police eyed him throughout with gravely concentrated interest, nodding his understanding.

"I see," he said slowly. "You make it clear enough. Moreover, you've convinced me. I didn't really believe from the first you'd had any hand in this ghastly mess, but I couldn't take chances, of

course. You're at liberty to take up these pistols as soon as you please; in fact, I advise you to do so immediately. From what's taken place already, you may have need of 'em within the next ten seconds. . . . Now for this coolie. If he's able to speak, I'll get some information out of him."

"'Tis too far gone he is, I'm fearing."

"We'll soon find out." The Englishman bent over the man, who was now very quiet, but, by the constant flicker of his cunning eyes, still conscious. A hasty examination told the investigator all he needed to know about the nature of the wound. "He'll not last long," said Lieutenant Couch, and began to converse with the local vernacular of Pidgin-English, about one word in ten of which was intelligible to O'Rourke. As he continued to speak the coolie's scowl darkened and he interrupted with a negative motion of his head. The sub-chief repeated his remarks with emphasis. For reply he got a monosyllable that sounded, as much as anything else, like an oath. Couch looked up. "He says he wants water, and I suspect he won't speak until he gets it. Can you——?"

O'Rourke fetched the half-empty carafe and Couch put it to the coolie's lips, permitting him to drink as much as he liked. But as soon as the bottle was removed the fellow shut his mouth like a trap and refused a word in answer to the lieutenant's demands and persuasions.

"Stubborn brute," growled Couch. "Most of

these animals here belong to some devilish tong or other, and they'd rather die than say anything touching on the business of the society or affecting the interests of a brother-member. But I think I know a way to bring him to reason. Hand me that knife, please."

Wondering, O'Rourke tendered him the weapon that had brought death to Sypher. The lieutenant wiped it callously on a corner of the coolie's blouse and held the keen shining blade before his eyes, accompanying the action with a few emphatic phrases. A curious expression, compounded of sullen fury and abject panic fright, showed in the Chinaman's eyes, and his lips were as if by magic unsealed. However reluctant, he began to chatter and spoke at length, delivering himself of a long statement which Couch punctuated now and again with pertinent, leading questions.

At length, throwing aside the knife, he jumped up, strong excitement burning in his eyes. "I've got enough from him," he said rapidly. "I'll explain later. You'll help—of course; your wife's involved as well as Miss Pynsent. But I don't think you need fear; we'll be in time. Are you ready? . . . Half a minute; I've got to use that telephone."

He ran out into the hall, rang up and shouted a number into the receiver, and for a few moments spoke rapidly in a Burmese dialect. O'Rourke gathered that he was speaking with a native subordinate at the police headquarters in Rangoon.

Couch swung back into the study. "Got those revolvers, sir? Then come along; we'll have to run for it. Fortunately our launch is handy; otherwise . . ."

He sprang across the veranda and down to the lawn, O'Rourke pelting after him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

A NIGHT of velvet blackness, softly opaque, lay upon land and water. The police launch, shuddering with the vibrations of a motor running at high tension, sped down the silent reaches of Rangoon River like a hunted ghost. She ran without lights, these having been extinguished by Couch's directions, regardless of harbour regulations or danger. Happily the hour was late enough to relieve them of much fear of trouble with other craft; the upper reaches of the river were practically deserted.

In the bow Couch was handling the wheel with the nonchalance of one from whom the river had no secrets by night or day. To O'Rourke it seemed no light task to pilot so slight a craft at such high speed through that Stygian darkness; yet the subchief was accomplishing the feat without a discernable trace of fear or tremor of uncertainty.

O'Rourke sat beside him. In the stern a police-orderly acted as mechanic, attending to the motor. These three, no more, made up the rescue party.

Though devoured by impatience and anxiety, O'Rourke forbore to question Couch, hesitating to

divert his attention from his task and knowing that as soon as he could the young lieutenant would speak. From the time when the coolie had yielded, there had been not a second's rest for either; neither had had time to confer save on questions of the most immediate moment; and control of these Couch had voluntarily and naturally assumed, deciding, acting and directing in the same thought, apparently.

"Your wife, with Miss Pynsent," said Couch abruptly, without looking round—"at least I presume it's Mrs. O'Rourke, from what you say—have been kidnapped by a gang of highbinders and are now aboard a junk in the lower river, which will sail for God-knows-where at the turn of the tide. That's the only thing that saves 'em. We'll be on 'em before they're able to force a way down the river."

O'Rourke groaned, holding his head with both hands. "My wife . . . !" he said brokenly.

"I know," Couch interrupted grimly; "I know how you feel. Miss Pynsent is there, too, you see."

"Oh," said O'Rourke, "I didn't understand that. . . . I'm sorry." He dropped a hand on the younger man's shoulder and let it rest there briefly. "Please God," he said reverently, "there'll be many another polluted yellow soul yammering at the gates of hell this night!"

"Amen!" said Couch. . . . "We sha'n't be long now."

Silently O'Rourke removed his coat and waistcoat, his collar and lawn tie, and turned back his cuffs. "Evening clothes are hardly the thing to fight in," he said; "but I'm thinking 'twon't make a deal of difference to me. Got any cartridges for a Webley mark IV?"

"Wheeler has. Give Colonel O'Rourke a few, Wheeler," said Couch, addressing the orderly.

The latter rummaged in a locker and pressed into O'Rourke's hand half a dozen cartridges, with which the adventurer proceeded to replenish the empty chamber in his revolver.

"I'd only discharged one," he observed, "but 'tis likely we'll need that, even, with only the three of us against a junk-load."

"Oh, I telephoned for reinforcements, of course," returned Couch. "They ought to be there ahead of us."

"What did the coolie tell ye, if ye've time to talk?"

Couch laughed. "I daresay you're wondering how I made him speak at all."

"That's the true word for ye."

"I threatened to cut off his silly pigtail and send him naked and dishonoured to the ghostly halls of his ancestors. It's wonderful how much those callous brutes dote on that decoration. I told him further, that if he lied, when I found it out I'd return and shave him bald as an egg, even if he

were dead by that time. So I persuaded the truth from him, the whole story—from his side of it."

"I'm listening. . . ."

"He confessed he was in the pay—like these chaps we're after now—of a highly respectable Chinese merchant and head of one of the tongs—one of the richest men in Rangoon, who, it seems, was also after that ruby. I can't imagine what he wanted of it, but that'll come out, probably; the man's rich enough to buy dozens of stones as fine. However . . . I gather he'd laid his plan far ahead. The coolie intimated you'd been watched all the way from Bombay. At all events, the brutes were ready when you arrived; Sypher was a doomed man from the moment you handed over the Pool of Flame. They surrounded his house this night, coming up from the river, just as soon as it was dark enough to conceal their actions. Then they found a third element in the business—your friend Des Trebes, all unsuspicious of them, lurking on the veranda and watching Sypher through the window. So they waited to see what he was up to. And pretty soon they found out. Sypher came downstairs, went to the safe and opened it; I presume he had the stone in his hand, ready to put away. While he was standing there the Frenchman slipped up behind and stabbed him, annexing the stone and leaving the way he got in. The instant he stepped off the veranda the Chinese got him; but

he managed to scream before they could silence him and drew the attention of the household, Miss Pynsent, your wife and the servants. So to cover things up they had to gather them all in. The servants were killed—there were three of them—and the women . . ."

Neither man spoke for a time. Then Couch resumed.

"This coolie was an outsider—a servant of the merchant's—not one of the junk gang; so he stayed ashore, and thought it would be a fine young scheme to return and do a little looting on his own. . . . I've telephoned the head office to arrest that cursed merchant and confiscate his house and goods and detain anybody they could catch connected with him. The net's well enough laid, and I think . . ."

The lights of the city became visible, strung along the right bank of the river as the launch rounded a bend. Couch swung the little boat out into midstream. "Half-speed, Wheeler," he said, adding to O'Rourke: "I've got to pick out that junk. I presume the right one will have all sail set and be moving downstream with the tide; it's just on the turn now and fortunately there's no wind worth mentioning. . . . I wish I could see something of the other launch." He peered anxiously into the obscurity ahead. "If there were only starlight——!" he complained bitterly. "Stand by,

Wheeler, to stop the motor. We'll drop alongside with the current, as quietly as we can. Colonel O'Rourke, will you get forward and take the boathook and headwarp, please; I'm needed at the wheel and Wheeler at the engine until we make fast."

Cautiously the Irishman rose, took the boathook Couch offered him, and crept out upon the narrow triangle of deck at the bows. Crouching there, he found the headwarp and waited, tense with anxious expectancy, staring ahead in futile effort to penetrate the wide, shadowy reaches of the river. But the mystical distances confused and eluded him. The launch seemed to move, panting, in an abyss of night. She made little noise: a hiss of water beneath her stem; the steady humming of the motor, throttled down to half speed; the muffled gasping of the exhaust. And presently even these ceased at a word from Couch, and the launch moved only with the tide.

And still O'Rourke could not discern the junk. A fever boiled in his veins; he found it difficult to breathe. . . . The damp river air swam past his face, gratefully cool. Dark bulking shadows glided by on either hand, as if they moved and the launch itself were motionless. He was conscious of the yellow glimmer of riding-lights, shining high in confused tangle of spars and rigging that loomed spectrally against a sky only a shade lighter than the lower world. . . . On the southern horizon heat lightning played like a naked sword; and he

thought, with a pang in his heart, of another night in Monte Carlo. . . .

Abruptly a towering wall of opaque black rose out of the darkness to starboard. He braced himself for the imminent instant of action, poised so lightly upon his toes and fingertips that a swell from a moving vessel would have thrown him off his balance, perhaps overboard. The launch closed swiftly and silently in upon the black wall; it towered over him like a cliff; far above he could see dim divisions between black and black that must be the rail. And he shook his head, dismayed; he could never scale that, he thought; not even the O'Rourke could accomplish a miracle. But in a breath it had faded back, and he realised that the towering poop of the junk had misled him. They were now alongside at the waist. He stood up and saw a low railing moving past, breast high, thrust out with the boathook and caught it over the edge of the rail, drew the launch in, let go the boathook and, with the headwarp wrapped about his hand, jumped blindly.

Something dealt him a vicious, all but paralysing, blow in the pit of the stomach; he doubled up, for a moment helpless, across the junk's rail, but retained sufficient presence of mind to hold on to the headwarp. Then, recovering a trifle, he squirmed over and fell sprawling upon the deck, his heels drumming an abrupt and violent alarm. From somewhere he heard a shrill jabbering arise, with an ensuing patter of

bare feet. Swiftly he got upon his knees and drew in the headwarp, with his free hand searching along the rail for a cleat. Something thumped heavily on the deck beside him, and grunted; and something else followed with a second bump; and the launch swung outboard and, caught by the current, jerked the headwarp from his grasp. "May the luck of the O'Rourke still hold!" he prayed fervently, getting upon his feet to realise that, with Couch and the man Wheeler, he was imprisoned aboard the junk, doomed there to remain whatever might befall, until the coming of the second launch . . . or perhaps for a longer time.

As he rose some indistinct body ran into him and cannoned off with an uncouth yelp; with no time to draw his revolvers, the adventurer stuck out with a bare hand and had the satisfaction of finding a goal for his blow—of landing heavily on bare flesh and of hearing the dull sound of a fall upon the deck.

Synchronously lights were flashing out fore and aft. A revolver spat venomously beside him. Somewhere a man screamed and fell, whimpering horribly. The revolver exploded a second time. There were confused noises, as of a furious struggle, rough and tumble, and he suspected that one or another of his companions had been tackled bodily by one of the junk's crew. On his own part he caught a glimpse of a shadow moving ghostlike against one of the lights, and promptly exorcised it with a shot.

By this time the vessel seemed to be caught in the grip of pandemonium; shouts and shots vied with screams, groans, confused padding footsteps, to make the moment one of a nightmare. The boarding party stood at bay, not daring to venture from the spot on which they had landed, firing steadily but with discretion. The man who had been grappled with—Wheeler—had succeeded in accounting for his antagonist and now stood shoulder to shoulder with Couch. Did a head shine in the light of a lantern or a footfall sound near by, a bullet sought it, more often than not successfully, if one were to judge from the responsive yells.

The unexpectedness of the attack had been their strongest ally, the confusion thereby created in the minds of the attacked an invaluable aid. But now abruptly they found the tables turned. The initial error on the part of the Chinese in displaying lights was remedied; they disappeared as if upon a concerted signal, leaving the deck in absolute obscurity. With this the firing ceased, and save for the cries of the wounded, silence obtained where had been a chaos of discordant sounds.

Huddled together like children in fear of the powers of darkness, the three held their fire against the inevitable assault in force, handicapped fearfully by their absolute ignorance of the lay of the deck, of the number of their opponents, and of from which quarter they had to expect the attack. And the

silence and the suspense wore upon their nerves until the final struggle came in the shape of a boom to save them from madness. And it came with a rush and a will, cyclonic, tremendous, overpowering. By sheer weight of human flesh the Europeans were pinned against the rail, fighting at handgrips with a cruel and cunning foe far better prepared for such business than they. For at such close quarters pistols were practically worthless save as clubs, while knives could slip to slay through almost any interstice, however straitened. O'Rourke had no time to think of his companions. Stung to desperation by the silent, unrelenting fury of his assailants—twice he was conscious of the white-hot agony of a knife-thrust, one penetrating the flesh of his side and scraping his ribs, the other biting deep into his thigh—he fired until he had but one cartridge left in his revolver, and expended that blowing out the brains of an extraordinarily persistent coolie, then dropped the useless weapon and trusted to his naked strength.

It served him well for a little. One man, precipitated by the weight of those behind him into the adventurer's arms, he seized by the throat and throttled in a twinkling; then lifting him from the deck, he exerted his power to the utmost, and cast the body like a log into the midst of the mêlée. Thus clearing a little space, he found himself able to step aside and let another run past him into the bulwark;

and seeing the sheen of a swordblade in the fellow's hand, before he could recover seized his wrist, twisted it savagely, and wrenched the weapon away.

It hung with a strange balance in hands more used to the Continental rapier and broadsword, but it was far better than nothing, and he made shift to employ it effectually, if at haphazard. . . .

The finale came a moment later, signalised by a blinding flash of light more bright than that of day, which fell athwart the deck and illuminated instantaneously every inch of the fighting ground. Fervently he blessed the near-by vessel that had turned its searchlight on the junk. The scene it revealed beggared the experience of a man whose trade was fighting; it fell upon decks slippery with blood and littered with the bodies of dead and wounded; it silenced a confusion indescribable. Upon that insane turmoil the light fell with the effect of a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

Screaming shrilly in their panic, the Chinese scattered and fell away, leaving O'Rourke beside Couch, Wheeler being down and buried beneath three Chinese corpses. And instantaneously something grated harshly against the starboard side of the junk, and a man, his figure stark black against the cold white glare, leaped upon the rail and tumbled inboard. Others to the number of a dozen followed him, swarming over the decks. Couch reeled towards them, babbling orders and instructions.

The second launch had arrived.

Sick and faint, O'Rourke slouched back against the rail, watching with lack-lustre eyes the end of the chapter. It was simple to the point of seeming farcical in comparison with that which preceded it. The dazed and now outnumbered Chinese offered no further resistance. Disarmed and put under guard, they disappeared from his consciousness, while he watched the men from the second launch, spurred by Couch. scatter in search of the abducted women.

Loss of blood was beginning to tell upon him; his strength seemed altogether gone; his wits buzzed in his head like a swarm of gnats. He grasped his support convulsively, beginning to appreciate how seriously he was hurt. He heard as from a great distance thin, faint cries of men shouting in triumph; saw Couch, a pygmy shape, holding in his arms a doll who wore the face of Miss Pynsent. Then of a sudden he was conscious of a woman hastening toward him, a fantastic and incongruous figure in a dinner-gown, her skirts trailing in the slime of the shambles, her arms outheld to him; and knew her for his wife.

He essayed to speak, but could not. He felt her arms close about him. In the face of the searchlight's penetrating and undeviating glare, night closed down upon him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

In after days, when he was altogether well and whole, they journeyed forth, these two, the man and his wife, from Rangoon northward. The railway carried them some distance; later they struck off with their train into the primitive wilderness beyond the ulimate British outposts on the Chindwine, main tributary to the Irrawaddy.

The land was peaceful, hospitable, and very, very lovely in its wildness. Their happiness was ecstasy. By day they rode through jungle, wood and rolling uplands, or less easily through the fastnesses of the hills, side by side, thought linked to thought, their hearts attuned. By night their camps were pitched in a new-found world of beauty, wonderful in its shadowy mystery. Sometimes they were the guests of native princes in their palaces, again they slept a hundred miles from nowhere, beside the banks of some rolling flood whose very name was strange to them. Reunited, they lived as one being in a world of iridescent wonders.

It was so ordered that they came, toward sundown of a certain day, to the foot of a hill crowned

with a great pagoda of many multiplied roofs fringed with a myriad silver bells that tinkled ceaselessly in the evening airs.

Here they dismounted and together made the ascent of an age-old wooden stairway, broad and easy, with a rail of carven wood coloured like a rainbow, and thronged from the first rise to the last with weary pilgrims, beggars, lepers, laughing children, mendicant holy men. The sun was low upon the horizon when, having bribed their way along that gauntlet, O'Rourke and his bride (she could never be aught less to him) attained to the topmost platform and, having received permission, with meet show of reverence entered the temple.

It was very dark inside and for a time they moved blindly in and out; but at length they came to a massive doorway looking toward the West, and here they paused, hand in hand, looking up to the placid face of a huge Buddha who, squatting cross-legged upon a pedestal, looked through the incense-scented gloom ceaselessly forward to Nirvana.

The figure, carven originally from stone, had been so heavily plastered with gold-leaves by the devout, that now it had all the semblance of being gold to its core; and, lavishly decorated with necklaces and bracelets of rare jewels set in crusted gold, in the evening glow it shone like some great lamp of holiness. Only its face was in shadow.

Slowly the light struck higher beneath the eaves

of the pagoda, and slowly it crept up and yet up, until its last blood-red shaft revealed the Buddha's forehead and what was set therein, a monstrous ruby.

The woman gasped faintly and clung tightly to her husband's arm. He held her close, watching the great stone flame and throb and pulse, like a pool of living flame swimming in darkness.

And then the light of the world went out.

Pensively in the dusk they descended the temple staircase. At the foot, before they remounted their horses, the woman came to the man and put her hands upon his shoulders.

"Terence," she said, "I think I am very weary. Take me home."

He gathered her into his arms.

"I think," she said, "it frightened me—made me fearful of this country—the Pool of Flame, up there."

"Ye've seen the last of it," he said tenderly, "and so have I. 'Tis done with, like the days of me adventurings. I have no thought but you, dear heart. Let us go home."

THE END

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